

seems to have been a somewhat artificial literary dialect. Most important, West Saxon is not the direct ancestor of any of the standard dialects of Present-Day English. However, we really have no alternative because the overwhelming majority of surviving OE texts are written in West Saxon. Wessex included Winchester, an important seat of textual production and the capital city of English Kings.

OLD ENGLISH PHONOLOGY

Consonants

Old English (OE) retained all the consonants of Common Germanic, although the distribution of some of them had been altered by sound changes that occurred between the split-up of Common Germanic and the earliest surviving OE texts. With a few exceptions, the OE consonant inventory is the same as that of PDE. In addition, sound changes had given Old English three new sounds (/ʃ, ʧ, ʝ/) that were phonemic by late Old English, if not earlier. In contrast to its vocalic (vowel) system, the OE consonant system looks surprisingly modern; Present-Day English still has all the same phonemes, though it has since acquired a few new ones, and the distribution of some of the consonants has shifted. In Table 5.1 the shaded consonants are new ones developed between Common Germanic and Old English (compare to Figure 2.1, PDE consonants). All the consonants of PDE except one appeared at least allophonically in OE; the one exception, PDE /ʒ/, developed late and is still rare in English. It appears in such words as *pleasure* and *casual*.

W 5.3

All the structurally significant changes in consonants sounds between Common Germanic and Old English occurred with the velar consonants /k/ and /g/, both of which were affected by their environments. At first these

T A B L E 5.1 Old English Consonants

		Bilabial	Labio-dental	Inter-dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Velar
Stops	Voiceless	p			t		k
	Voiced	b			d		g
Affricates	Voiceless					ʧ	
	Voiced					ʝ	
Fricatives			f	θ	s	ʃ	h
Nasals		m			n		
Lateral					l		
Retroflex					r		
Semivowels		w				j	

changes would have been only allophonic, but eventually phonemic fission took place.

Gmc OE

- /k/ > /k/ before a consonant or a back vowel: OE *clāne* ‘clean’; *crypel* ‘cripple’; *carfulnes* ‘anxiety’; *corn* ‘grain’; *cū* ‘cow’.
- > /č/ next to a front vowel (unless this front vowel resulted from umlaut; see below): OE *cēap* ‘bargain’; *cild* ‘child’; *dīc* ‘ditch’; *þæc* ‘thatch’. This change is the origin of the phoneme /č/ in OE.
- /g/ > /g/ before consonants, before back vowels, and before front vowels resulting from umlaut: OE *græs* ‘grass’; *glæm* ‘gleam’; *gān* ‘go’; *gōd* ‘good’; *gyltig* ‘guilty’.
- > /ɣ/ (a voiced velar fricative) between back vowels or after /l/ or /r/: OE *sagu* ‘saw, saying’; *beorg* ‘barrow’; *fylgan* ‘follow’.
- > /j/ before or between front vowels and finally after a front vowel: OE *giet* ‘yet’; *gēar* ‘year’; *manig* ‘many’. This /j/ simply merged with the /j/ inherited from IE and Gmc. Therefore IE **jeu-* gave OE *geong* ‘young’; but also IE **ghel* gave Gmc **gel-* and OE *gellan* /*jellan*/ ‘to yell’.
- /sk/ > /š/ (spelled *sc*) in all environments by late OE; indeed, all occurrences of the cluster /sk/ in PDE are from loanwords. OE examples include *fisc* ‘fish’; *wasca* ‘wash’; *scearp* ‘sharp’.
- /gg/ > /j/ in medial or final position; OE /j/ did not appear at the beginning of a word or syllable; OE *brycg* ‘bridge’; *secg* ‘sedge, reed’; *mycg* ‘midge’.

The only major difference between the consonant phonemes of OE and of PDE is the lack of *phonemic* voiced fricatives in OE. Voiced fricatives (v, ð, z) did, however, appear as allophones of their corresponding voiceless fricatives (f, θ, s). When the fricative (a consonant produced by forcing air through a constricted passage) was surrounded by voiced sounds, it became voiced; otherwise, it was voiceless. Double fricatives were also voiceless, hence OE *rīsan* /rīzan/ ‘to rise’, but *missan* /missan/ ‘to miss’, *singan* /singan/, and *græs* /græs/ ‘grass’. This voiceless-voiced alternation is still reflected to some extent in the pronunciation of such PDE words as *knife* (OE *cnīf*)/*knives* (OE *cnīfas*) and *path* (OE *pæþ*)/*paths* (OE *pāþas*). Note that there was no corresponding [ž] allophone of OE /š/, however.

In Old English, [ŋ] was simply an allophone (a nondistinctive variant) of /n/ that appeared before /k/ or /g/. It was not to become phonemic until at least late ME; indeed, it is not phonemic for many speakers of English to this day. Old English /r/ was possibly an alveolar trill, but we have no way of knowing for certain.

Old English /h/ deserves some comment because its distribution was much wider in OE than in PDE and it had several allophones not present in PDE. Initially before vowels and the consonants /l, r, n, w/, it was /h/ as in PDE

(OE *hand* ‘hand’; *hlædel* ‘ladle’; *hræfn* ‘raven’; *hnappian* ‘take a nap’; *hwīt* ‘white’). After front vowels, it was a palatal fricative [ç]: OE *sihþ* ‘sight’. Elsewhere it was the forcefully articulated velar fricative [x]: OE *þurh* ‘through’; *hēah* ‘high’; *eahta* ‘eight’.

The OE consonant system also differed from that of PDE in having phonemically long (or “doubled”) consonants.¹ In writing they were indicated by doubling the letter; for example, OE *bed* ‘prayer’/ *bedd* ‘bed’; OE *fȳlan* ‘to be-foul’/ *fȳllan* ‘to fill’. (To get some feeling for the difference between long and short consonants, compare the length of the /m/ sound in PDE *home-made* with that of *homey*.)

Finally, Old English had some clusters of consonants that have been lost in PDE. Most noticeable are the clusters with /h/ mentioned above, of which all but /hw/ have lost the /h/ today—and even /hw/ is restricted to certain dialects, though it is still regularly spelled (as in *what*, *whale*, *whistle*). We have also lost in pronunciation the OE initial clusters /kn/ and /gn/. Again, the PDE spelling system usually retains them as “silent” letters: OE *cnēow* ‘knee’; *gnæt* ‘gnat’.

Despite these differences in detail, the consonant system of Old English is remarkably similar to that of PDE. Both have a basic voiced-voiceless opposition shared by three sets of stops; both have four sets of fricatives plus /h/ and two affricates. Both have a single lateral /l/, an /r/, and a series of nasals corresponding in place of articulation to the stops. Both have two phonemic semivowels. To the native speaker of English, this overall system of oppositions may be so familiar that it seems only natural for all human languages. But one does not even have to leave the IE family to find different ways of organizing consonant oppositions. Hindi, for example, has four, not three, stop positions. Chinese has the same three stop positions, but related stops are distinguished by aspiration or lack of aspiration rather than by a voiced-voiceless opposition. In short, the English consonant system has remained highly stable for at least the past twelve hundred years. Even the thousands of loanwords that have entered English since OE times have not affected the basic system; in general, English speakers have adapted non-English consonants in these words by substituting similar English sounds for them.

Vowels

Throughout the history—and prehistory—of English, its vowels have been much less stable than its consonants. So many complex changes occurred between Common Germanic and Old English that we will not attempt to cover all of them exhaustively here. With respect to the overall system, the following qualitative changes occurred between CGmc and OE; most of these involve the Gmc diphthongs.

1. Most of the long consonants of OE had arisen in West Germanic times, when a /j/ following a short vowel + a consonant doubled the consonant, a process called **geminatio**. In addition to geminating the consonant, the /j/ also mutated the preceding vowel. Thus, for example, earlier **auveljan* ‘to kill’ became OE *cwellan*. The consonant /r/, however, did not geminate, e.g., earlier **suwerjan* ‘to swear’, OE *suerian*.

Gmc		OE	Gmc		OE
a	>	æ	au	>	ēa
ai	>	ā	eu	>	ēo

W 5.4

By far the most important and widespread vowel change between Germanic and Old English was **front mutation** (also known as **umlaut** or **i/j mutation**). This change predates written OE and is shared by all West and North Germanic languages. Because the fourth-century Gothic texts show no evidence of it, we assume that it occurred afterward, probably in the sixth century. Under front mutation, if a stressed syllable was followed by an unstressed syllable containing /i/ or /j/, the vowel of the stressed syllable was fronted or raised; that is, the preceding stressed vowel partially assimilated to the following high front /i/ or /j/. Only low front and back vowels and diphthongs were affected.

Table 5.2 summarizes the effects of front mutation. Note that the examples of words with mutated vowels show no following /i/ or /j/. This is because, after front mutation had taken place, the /i/ or /j/ that had caused it in the first place either dropped out entirely or changed to /e/. If we had to rely on evidence from Old English alone, we would have an effect with no apparent cause. Gothic cognates are helpful here. For example, for OE *dōm*/*dēman*, the corresponding Gothic forms are *dōms* and *dōmjan*; the /j/ that was to cause mutation in the OE verb is still evident.

This change in the phonology of English, regular enough in itself, had drastic effects on the morphology of English. Within a single paradigm, some suffixes

TABLE 5.2 Front Mutation (Umlaut)

Original Vowel	Resulting Vowel	Nonmutated OE Example	Mutated OE Example
æ	e	<i>hwæt</i> 'bold'	<i>hwettan</i> 'to incite'
a + nasal	e	<i>mann</i> 'man'	<i>menn</i> 'men'
ā	æ	<i>lār</i> 'lore'	<i>læran</i> 'to teach'
o	e*	Latin <i>olium</i> 'oil'	<i>ele</i> 'oil'
ō	ē*	<i>dōm</i> 'judgment'	<i>dēman</i> 'to judge'
u	y	<i>cuman</i> 'to come'	<i>cyme</i> 'arrival'
ū	ȳ	<i>mūs</i> 'mouse'	<i>mȳs</i> 'mice'
e	i†	<i>beran</i> 'to bear'	<i>bir(e)b</i> 'it bears'
ea	y‡	<i>eald</i> 'old'	<i>yldra</i> 'older'
ēa	ȳ‡	<i>drēam</i> 'joy'	<i>drȳman</i> 'to rejoice'
eo	y‡	<i>feorr</i> 'far'	<i>āfyrran</i> 'to remove'
ēo	ȳ‡	<i>bēodan</i> 'to offer'	<i>bȳtt</i> 'it offers'

*The mutation of /o/ and /ō/ was originally to the midrounded vowels /œ/ and /ǣ/. Unrounding to /e/ and /ē/ soon occurred in West Saxon, and it is this unrounded result that we show here.

†The raising of /e/ to /i/ occurred earlier, in Common Germanic, but for simplicity's sake, we include it here under the later general front mutation.

‡The diphthongs originally mutated to /ie/ but were being spelled ⟨y⟩ or ⟨i⟩ by late West Saxon (the dialect of most surviving texts).

might have had /i/ or /j/ while others did not. Those with /i/ or /j/ would mutate the root vowel of the words, while forms without the /i/ or /j/ in the suffix would remain unchanged. Four parts of the OE morphological system were especially affected.

1. One class of OE nouns had had an /i/ in the endings of the dative singular and the nominative-accusative plural. The /i/ mutated the root vowel, giving rise to oppositions like nom.-acc. sg. *fōt* 'foot'/nom.-acc. pl. *fēt* 'feet'. Today's irregular plurals *men*, *feet*, *teeth*, *geese*, and *lice* all result from mutation; OE had other such mutated plurals that have since been regularized by analogy—for example, *bōc* 'book'/*bēc* 'books', and *fēond* 'foe'/*fȳnd* 'foes'.
2. Some common adjectives had i-mutation in their comparative and superlative forms: compare OE *strang* 'strong' with *strengra* 'stronger' and *strengest* 'strongest'. All but one of these adjectives were regularized by PDE; the sole exception is the alternative comparative and superlative *elder* and *eldest* for *old*, which have survived beside the regularized *older* and *oldest* through a differentiation in meaning.
3. Many Germanic weak verbs were formed by adding a formative suffix beginning with /j/ or /i/ to another part of speech or a form of a strong verb. Again, mutation gave the resulting new word a different root vowel from that of its etymon. Examples include *settan*, formed from the past sg. *sæt* of the verb *sittan* and giving rise to the PDE opposition *sit/set*. Similarly, the PDE oppositions *lie/to lay*, *to fall/to fell*, *whole/heal*, and *doom/deem* all result from front mutation.
4. The second- and third-person singular present indicative forms of strong verbs had originally had /i/ in their endings; after mutation, these forms had a different root vowel from the rest of the present-tense paradigm. Because any vowel subject to mutation was affected, the alternation was widespread, even though it has been totally regularized by PDE. Old English examples include *cuman* 'to come'/*cȳmþ* 'he comes'; *feohtan* 'to fight'/*fȳht* 'he fights'; *standan* 'to stand'/*stent* 'he stands'.

Because the precise phonetic quality of OE vowels is not known and because even the phonemic status of some is uncertain, the vowels listed in Figure 5.5 can represent only an approximation. The OE short vowels /i, e, o, u/ were probably tense vowels, more like the vowels of Continental languages today than like PDE /ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, ʊ/. We have presented them as such here, but it is possible that they were already laxer than their counterparts in, for instance, modern French or Italian. (Compare with Figures 2.2 and 2.3, PDE vowels.)

There is some uncertainty about the pronunciations of the diphthongs *ēa* and *ēo*. Because they are consistently spelled differently from each other and from simple vowels in the manuscripts, most scholars assume that they were separate phonemes and that they were diphthongs. However, because all of them were to fall together with pure vowels in Middle English, the picture is much less than clear. The most widely accepted opinion is that *ēa* represented /æ̃ə/ and *ēo* represented /ɛ̃ə/.

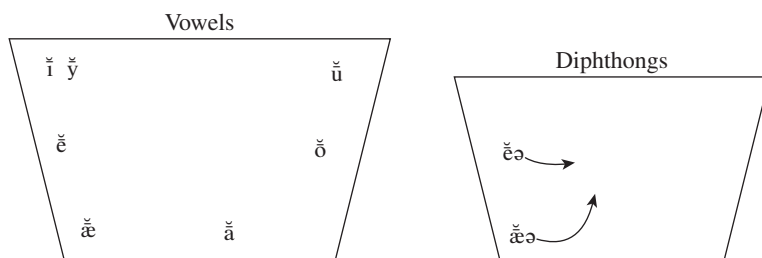


FIGURE 5.5 Old English Vowels and Diphthongs.

Prosody

Prosody is the stress or pitch patterns that give a language its perceived rhythms. Although many surviving OE texts are punctuated with marks that apparently indicated “breath-groups” and served as a guide to reading aloud, we have no direct evidence of the prosody of OE because stress and pitch have never been indicated systematically in English writing. The differences between the intonation patterns of contemporary London English and Chicago English, for example, show that striking pitch differences are possible between dialects that are mutually intelligible, yet these differences are not revealed in any way in written English.

Some stress patterns, however, are at least indirectly recoverable from Old English poetry. Old English inherited the Germanic verse traditions, which were based, not on syllable-counting and rhyme but on alliteration and a stress-timed line. Alliteration held the line together, and the alliterating syllables took major stress. The number of syllables per line varied, but the time elapsing from one major stress to another was roughly equal. An example of this can be seen in the poem, “The Dream of the Rood.” The accented syllables are in boldface. The caesuras (spaces) in the middle of the lines represent the breaks between half lines, each of which contains two stresses. Notice how many of the stressed syllables also alliterate.

***D**uhte me þæt ic **g**esawe syllice **t**reow
It seemed to me that I saw a most rare tree
on **l**yft lædan, **l**eohte bewunden,
high aloft reach, wound in light,
beama beorhtost. Eall þæt **b**eacen **w**æs
the brightest of beams. All that beacon was
begoten mid **g**olde; **g**immas **s**todon
covered with gold; gems stood
fægere æt **f**oldan sceatum, swylce þær **f**ife **w**æron
fair at the earth’s surface, five were
uppe on þam **e**axlegespanne.
above about the crosspiece.*

Scholars can identify the major stresses in a line of OE verse. When they do so, they find that the stress patterns of OE correspond closely to those of native

words in English today. (PDE loanwords from Latin and other languages, of course, often do not conform to the stress patterns of native words.) In Old English, the root syllable took major stress and subsequent syllables much lighter stress, as in the PDE words *friendliness*, *likelihood*, *unwanted*, and *becoming*. Compound words took a major stress on the first element and a secondary stress on the second, again corresponding to PDE patterns like *mánslaughter*, *cándlestick*, or *grásshopper* (OE *mánslêge*, *cándelsticca*, *gærshôppa*).

OLD ENGLISH GRAPHICS

The Futhorc

Some time shortly after the beginning of the Christian era, Germanic speakers developed a common alphabet. This alphabet, today called the **futhorc** (after its first six letters) or **runic alphabet** (from OE *rûn* ‘mystery, secret’), eventually spread to all Germanic-speaking areas. See Table 5.3.

W 5.8

The angled forms and lack of curves in all versions of the futhorc suggest that it was designed primarily for scratching or carving on wood or stone, and, indeed, most surviving runic inscriptions are on stone. However, it is possible that it was also used extensively for writing on bark and wood and even leather or cloth, but that these less durable materials have all perished in the damp climate of northern Europe. The fact that our word *book* derives from a Germanic word meaning “beech tree” strongly suggests that wood and/or bark was an important early writing material.

The original futhorc had 24 symbols. As Germanic split into various dialects, each dialect tended to add new signs or abandon older ones to correspond to phonological changes in the dialect. In different versions of the futhorc used in England, the number of signs or “letters” ranged from 28 to 33.

Surviving runic inscriptions are plentiful in Scandinavia, less common in England. The two best-known English runic inscriptions are those on the Franks Casket, an eighth-century whalebone box, and the Ruthwell Cross, a large stone cross in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, which has in runic writing a portion of the Old English poem “The Dream of the Rood.”

Unlike the Latin or Greek alphabets, each character of the runic alphabet was “named” by a noun. All but two of these names, *eolh* and *Ing*, begin with the sound represented by the character. (The sounds that *eolh* and *Ing* represent—/x/ and /ŋ/—did not occur at the beginning of a word in Germanic languages.) Table 5.3 presents the 29-sign version of the English futhorc used in the OE “Runic Poem.” This poem has a short stanza of alliterative verse describing each sign, roughly parallel to our children’s alphabet books with their “A is for Apple, B is for Banana,” but on a much more sophisticated level. Table 5.3 also gives a transliteration of each symbol into the equivalent English letter or digraph and the probable phonetic value of each sign; the name of each runic sign and its meaning are also listed. Note that the order of signs in the futhorc differs from that in the Greek or Latin alphabets.

TABLE 5.3 The Runic Alphabet (Futhorc)



Rune	Equivalent	Probable Value	Name
ƿ	f	[f]	<i>feoh</i> 'movable property'
ᚱ	u	[u]	<i>ūr</i> 'bison, aurochs'
ᚳ	th	[θ]	<i>þorn</i> 'thorn'
ᚦ	o	[o]	<i>ōs</i> 'god'
ᚷ	r	[r]	<i>rād</i> 'road, journey'
ᚨ	c	[k]	<i>cēn</i> 'pine (torch)'
ᚵ	g	[g]	<i>giefu</i> 'gift'
ᚦ	w	[w]	<i>wēn</i> 'hope'
ᚱ	h	[h]	<i>hagol</i> 'hail'
ᚤ	n	[n]	<i>nīed</i> 'necessity'
ᚲ	i	[i]	<i>īs</i> 'ice'
ᚥ	y	[j]	<i>gēar</i> 'year'
ᚫ	ēo	[eə]?	<i>ēoh</i> 'yew-tree'
ᚨ	p	[p]	<i>peorþ</i> 'chessman'(?)
ᚷ	h	[x]	<i>eolh</i> 'elk (sedge)'(?)
ᚥ	s	[s]	<i>sigel</i> 'sun'
ᚦ	t	[t]	<i>tīr</i> 'glory'
ᚷ	b	[b]	<i>beorc</i> 'birch'
ᚱ	e	[e]	<i>eoh</i> 'war-horse'
ᚱ	m	[m]	<i>mann</i> 'person'
ᚲ	l	[l]	<i>lagu</i> 'sea'
ᚷ	ng	[ŋ]	<i>Ing</i> (name of a god)
ᚫ	œ	[œ]	<i>ēpel</i> 'native land'
ᚦ	d	[d]	<i>dæg</i> 'day'
ᚦ	a	[a]	<i>āc</i> 'oak'
ᚦ	æ	[æ]	<i>æsc</i> 'ash'
ᚦ	y	[y]	<i>ȳr</i> 'bow'(?)
✱	io	[io]?[ia]?	<i>īor</i> 'eel'(?)
ᚦ	ea	[æə]	<i>ēar</i> 'earth'








The eleventh stanza of the “Runic Poem” is that for the sign | /i/; the first three words of this stanza are *īs byþ oferceald* ‘ice is very cold’. In runic characters, this phrase is

ᚲ ᚷ ᚳ ᚦᚱᚲᚦᚦᚱ

Although we have written this phrase left-to-right and with spaces between the words, actual runic writing was sometimes right-to-left and either with no spaces between words or with dots separating words.

The Latin Alphabet

With the Christianization of England in the late sixth century, the Latin alphabet was adopted for writing English, and the runic alphabet, probably never used for long continuous texts, was almost—but not quite—abandoned. Despite the associations of the runic alphabet with pagan magic, the clerical scribes apparently felt that Christianity was securely established in England. At least, they themselves occasionally wrote runic signs in their manuscripts. For example, in the manuscript of the poem *Beowulf*, the rune  is twice used in place of the full word *ēþel* ‘native land’ (the name of the  rune is *ēþel*).

Although the well-organized official mission to Christianize England came from Rome, and England eventually followed Roman practices and rituals, Irish missionaries also worked there, especially in the north. As a result, the particular style in which the Latin alphabet was written in England was closer to Irish practice than to Roman. The letter shapes of this so-called Insular alphabet are remarkably close to those we are familiar with today, but a few letters had characteristic features no longer employed. The forms for *f*, *g*, *r*, and *s* were , , , and , respectively. Two runic characters were also incorporated into the Latin alphabet to represent sounds not occurring in Latin; *thorn* (, *þ*), used for /θ/ and /ð/; and *wen* (, *ƿ*), used for /w/. For the sound /æ/, the English used the digraph *æ*. In addition to thorn, a “crossed d” (, *ð*), called *eth*, was also used to represent /θ/ and /ð/.

The Latin characters *q*, *x*, and *z* were known but were used infrequently. The character *c* was used to represent /k/ in most words, although *k* was also used (*cynning* or *kyning* ‘king’). In earlier OE, *y* represented the front rounded high vowel /y/, but as /y/ unrounded in the various dialects, *y* came to be interchangeable with *i* and *ie*. Old English /j/ was spelled *cg*; /š/ was spelled *sc*. The character *c* represented either /k/ or /č/, and *g* stood for /g/, /ɣ/, or /j/. Therefore, even in its early stages, the English writing system never met the criterion for an ideal alphabetic system with one and only one unique character for each phoneme of the language.

Spelling and Punctuation

Though it is not inaccurate to say that classical Old English had a standardized spelling, the spelling of all manuscripts—or any one manuscript—was not absolutely consistent. In general, the later the manuscript, the less consistent the spelling. Most of the inconsistencies are due to changes in the language itself. For example, early OE distinguished the sounds represented by *γ* and *ie*, but late OE did not. Consequently, later manuscripts interchange *γ* and *ie* in the same word. Then, as /y/ unrounded to /i/ in some dialects, the letter *γ* came to be virtually interchangeable with the letter *i*. For example, the word “shield” could be spelled *sciold*, *scild*, or *scyld*, even within the same manuscript.

By late Old English, the vowels of unstressed inflectional endings had all been reduced to /ə/. The scribes themselves no longer perceived a difference in what had once been unstressed *-a*, *-e*, *-o*, and *-u*, so, if they had not learned the traditional spelling for a form, they often spelled all endings with the same

Naming the Stones

The etymologies of some of our most valuable gemstones are not especially interesting. *Diamond* means simply “hard” and *ruby* means “red.” More entertaining are the etymologies of some of the semiprecious stones. For example, *onyx* is from Greek *onux* ‘claw’ because onyx occasionally has a vein of white on a pink background like the half-moon of a fingernail. Greek also is the origin of the word *amethyst*; Greek *amethystos* means “anti-intoxicant” because amethyst was once thought to be a remedy for intoxication. Another supposedly medicinal stone was *jade*, from Spanish *ijada* ‘flank, loin,’ so named because it was considered a cure for colic of the kidneys. The word *pearl* ultimately derives from Latin *perna* ‘ham’ because of the ham-shaped stalk of the sea-mussel that was the source of pearls.

vowel letter—most often *e*, but sometimes *o* or *u*. By late Old English, unstressed final *-m* and final *-n* are also often confused, the tendency being to spell both as *-n*. Probably both *-n* and *-m* had been lost as full consonants in this position, their remaining traces being only nasalization of the preceding vowel.

Most consonants, especially those in stressed positions, had consistent spellings throughout the Old English period, and the distinction between long and short consonants was in general well preserved in the spelling. Certainly, Old English spelling is a model of consistency compared to the chaotic state of Middle English spelling. However, this consistency is somewhat misleading because most surviving manuscripts are in the West Saxon dialect, whereas the dialectal distribution of ME manuscripts is much wider.

Modern editions of Old English works designed for students usually normalize the spelling for the sake of convenience. In addition, many editions distinguish long from short vowels by placing a macron over long vowels. Old English scribes never distinguished vowel length this way. Though OE scribes often placed a kind of macron over vowels, this seems to have been intended to indicate stress in reading aloud, not vowel length.

By modern standards, punctuation in Old English manuscripts was scanty. The most important mark of punctuation was the raised point (a dot); it represented a pause but did not correspond to PDE conventions for either the comma or the period. In later Old English, a semicolon and an inverted semicolon called a *punctus elevatus* were employed to indicate pauses.

The modern distinction between capital and lowercase letters did not exist; essentially, there was only one form for most letters. Larger versions could be used for emphasis, especially at the beginning of a new section of text or “chapter.” (The words *capital* and *chapter* are cognates, both meaning “head.”)

An Illustration of Old English Graphics

W 5.7

Figure 5.6 shows the last five lines from a manuscript page of the Old English poem *Judith*, a late OE poem probably composed in the tenth century. It appears in the same manuscript as the much more famous poem *Beowulf*, the manuscript itself was copied about 1000. This passage includes all the regularly used characters

ðæoden gumena þænðæn he onðysse

ðeoden
ruler

gumena
(of) men

þenden
while

he
he

on ðysse
in this

worulde punode undæn wolcna hrofe

worulde
world

wunode
dwelt

under
under

wolcna
(of) clouds

hrofe
roof.

gefeolða wine swa druncen. Se rica

gefeol ða
Fell then

wine
(by) wine

swa
so

druncen.
drunk

Se rica
the powerful (one)

on his næste middan swa he nyste ræda

on his
in his

reste
bed

middan
middle

swa he nyste
that he not knew

ræda
reason

nanne ongeþit locan wiggend stopon

nanne
none

on gewitlocan
in mind.

wiggend
Warriors

stopon
stepped

FIGURE 5.6 These final lines from the OE poem *Judith* contain all the regularly used characters of the classical OE alphabet.

of the classical OE alphabet. A transliteration into the modern English alphabet and a word-for-word gloss of the passage appears below each word.

A point (period) is used as punctuation in the third line, although we probably would not use a period there in PDE. In the first and last lines, the preposition *on* is written together with the following word. In the third line, the adverb *ða* is not separated from the preceding verb and the demonstrative *se* is written together with the adjective *rica*. In the fourth line, the conjunction *swa*, the pronoun *he*, and the verb *nyste* are all written as one unit. Failure to separate unstressed function words from preceding or following words in common, but by no means universal, in OE manuscripts.

OLD ENGLISH MORPHOLOGY

Inflections

Throughout its history English has undergone a steady decrease in its inflectional affixes. Apart from the personal pronouns, Present-Day English has only two noun inflections (possessive and plural) and four verb inflections (third-person singular present indicative, past tense, past participle, and present participle). Some linguists also consider the comparative *-er* and superlative *-est* inflections; even including them, PDE has a total of only eight inflectional endings.

Present-Day English Inflections

<i>Noun</i>		parrot	mouse	
Plural		parrots	mice	
Possessive	Sg.	parrot's	mouse's	
	Pl.	parrots'	mice's	
<i>Verb</i>		listen	sing	
3rd person sg. pres. ind.		listens	sings	
Past		listened	sang	
Past participle		listened	sung	
Present participle		listening	singing	
<i>Adjective or Adverb</i>		fat	soon	good
Comparative		fatter	sooner	better
Superlative		fattest	soonest	best

Compared to PDE, OE looks wealthy in its inflections, but this wealth is only relative. Beside the inflectional system of classical Greek or Latin, the OE system seems meager. Further, the OE system had a number of inherent weaknesses that would contribute to its ultimate loss.

The reasons for this loss are outlined in the list below:

- Almost no paradigm contained the maximum amount of differentiation, and some paradigms had so few distinctions as to make the entire inflectional group virtually useless in distinguishing function within the sentence. For example, the definite adjective declension theoretically could have thirty distinct endings (3 genders × 2 numbers × 5 cases). Only five distinct endings appear; the ending *-an* alone fills seventeen of the possible thirty slots. (See Table 5.6.)
- Heavy stress on the root syllables and light stress on the succeeding syllables facilitated the reduction of the vowel inflections to /ə/ and the merger of /n/ and /m/ as /n/, which then dropped off while nasalizing the preceding vowel. It was finally lost without a trace.
- By OE times, the language had developed relatively fixed word orders that indicated the function of words within a clause. Thus, syntax provided a

TABLE 5.4 Morphology: Noun Cases and Their Uses**Nominative**

- Subject (Commonly used)
- Complement after verbs like “to be” (Commonly used)
- Direct address (somewhat commonly used)

Genitive

- Possessive, including most constructions in which PDE would use an “of” possessive. (Commonly used)
- Expressions of measure or of larger numbers (somewhat commonly used)
- Direct object of some verbs, especially those expressing deprivation (rarely used)
- In certain adverbial phrases (rarely used)
- In special meanings after some prepositions (rarely used)

Dative

- Object of most prepositions (Commonly used)
- Indirect object of verbs (Commonly used)
- Direct object of some verbs (somewhat commonly used)
- With some adjectives, especially those which would be followed by “to” in PDE (e.g., “dear to me”) (rarely used)
- With some possessives, especially involving parts of the body (rarely used)
- Some time expressions (rarely used)

Accusative

- Direct object of verbs (Commonly used)
- Object of prepositions expressing movement in time or space (somewhat commonly used)
- Some adverbial expressions of time or space (rarely used)

kind of backup system for ensuring intelligibility when inflections were lost—but it also made the inflections less necessary.

- Difficult to demonstrate but nonetheless important to the loss of OE inflections is the influence of thousands of loanwords from two other inflecting languages—Old Norse and French—into English. The simplest solution was just to leave off inflections entirely, a procedure that had already been used to some extent with Latin words into Old English.

For the basis of our discussion here, we use Late West Saxon, primarily because the bulk of surviving OE manuscripts are written in this dialect due to King Alfred’s concerted efforts in producing literary texts. However, OE underwent many changes between 450 and 1100. Further, West Saxon was only one of several dialects in Old English and is not even the direct ancestor of any of the contemporary major standard English dialects in England, the United States, Canada, Australia, or elsewhere. Finally, even within Late West Saxon manuscripts, often even within one manuscript copied by a single scribe, variants occur. Therefore the forms listed in Table 5.5 are more an idealized representation

TABLE 5.5 OE Noun Declensions

		Vocalic Declensions ("Strong" Nouns)			
		-a stems (masc. and neut.)		-o stems (fem.)	
Case		Masc. 'boat'	Neut. (Long)* 'bone'	Neut. (Short)* 'ship'	Short* 'grief'
Sg.	N	bāt	bān	scip	cearu
	A	bāt	bān	scip	ceare
	G	bātes	bānes	scipes	ceare
	D	bāte	bāne	scipe	ceare
Pl.	NA	bātas	bān	scipu	ceara
	G	bāta	bāna	scipa	ceara
	D	bātum	bānum	scipum	cearum

		Consonantal or -an Declension			
		("Weak" Nouns)		Plurals with i-mutation	
Case		Masc. 'name'	Neut. 'eye'	Fem. 'earth'	Masc. 'tooth'
Sg.	N	nama	eage	eorþe	tōþ
	A	naman	eage	eorþan	tōþ
	G	naman	eagan	eorþan	tōþes
	D	naman	eagan	eorþan	tēþ
Pl.	NA	naman	eagan	eorþan	tēþ
	G	namena	eagena	eorþena	tōþa
	D	namum	eagum	eorþum	tōþum

*A long syllable has a long vowel or ends in a long consonant or consonant cluster. Thus *bān* is long because it has a long vowel, and *scip* is short because its vowel is short and it ends in a single consonant. *Brycg* is a long syllable because *cg* counts as a long consonant.

than a description of the actual forms in use, even in a given place at a given time.

The following discussion is organized according to the traditional parts of speech (nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, and other classes). It is a less than satisfactory way of describing PDE, and it is no more satisfactory for OE. Fortunately, the areas of fuzziness for OE and for PDE are much the same—the problem of distinguishing adverbs and prepositions (such as *buton*, which means 'except', 'outside', and 'unless'), the highly miscellaneous nature of items called adverbs, the borderline between nonfinite verbs and adjectives, and so on. Hence, in understanding the vagaries of OE, our intuition as native speakers of PDE can usually take over when logic fails. Old English is, after all, still English.

Inflections in languages can appear in three positions: initial (prefixes), internal (infixes), and final (suffixes). Old English inflections, like PDE inflections, consisted primarily of suffixes. These included suffixes that made nouns from

adjectives (*-nes*, *-þu*, *-ung*, *-had*), adjectives from nouns or adjectives (*-sum*, *-lic*, *-ig*, *-en*), and verbs from adjectives or nouns (*-sian*, *-an*). There was less but still significant use of infixes (internal vowel changes), and no use of inflectional prefixes, though there were of course derivational prefixes that changed the meaning of words,² such as *for-* (an intensifier), *el-* (which meant ‘foreign’), and *wan-* (which added a negative connotation).

Nouns

Old English nouns were inflected for three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), four cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative), and two numbers (singular and plural). There was also a distinction between weak and strong nouns. Present-Day English nouns are not inflected for gender (except pronouns) and include two cases (possessive and non-possessive) and two numbers.

The gender of nouns was grammatical, not natural or biological as in PDE. That is, gender did not, except more or less by chance, correspond to the actual sex of the referent; grammatical gender is an attribute of the word, not of the word’s “real-world” referent. The inherent gender of the word determined certain of its endings and the forms of its modifiers and pronoun substitutes. For example, the OE words for both “woman” (*wīf*) and “child” (*cild*) were neuter. OE *wīfmann*, also meaning “woman,” was masculine, and *hlæfdige* ‘lady’ was feminine. Proportionally, almost half of OE nouns were masculine, about one-third were feminine, and the rest were neuter.

Despite the fact that grammatical gender prevailed, there were weaknesses in the system and, even as early as OE, signs of its eventual decline. First, there was heavy overlapping of endings, especially in (a) masculine and neuter nouns, and (b) all weak nouns. Second, only for a few words could the gender be determined by the form of the nominative singular. All uninflected nouns ending in *-a* were masculine (*hunta* ‘hunter’), and all abstract nouns ending in *-nes* were feminine (*glædnes* ‘joy’); but for most words, the nominative singular provided no clue as to gender. Examples include masculine *gāst* ‘spirit’; feminine *rest* ‘rest, sleep’; and neuter *dūst* ‘dust’.

That native speakers of OE were not themselves always sure of the correct gender is evidenced by the fact that many OE nouns are recorded with two different genders and a few with all three: *gyrn* ‘sorrow’ is both masculine and neuter; *sunbēam* ‘sunbeam’ is both masculine and feminine; *sūsl* ‘misery’ is both neuter and feminine; and *wēsten* ‘wilderness’ may be masculine, feminine, or neuter.

There were four cases commonly used for Old English nouns—the nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative. Their function is explained in Table 5.4. Although the instrumental case survived marginally in adjectives and pronouns

W 5.9,
W 5.10,
W 5.11,
W 5.12
and
W 5.13

2. Some scholars treat OE *ge-* as an inflectional prefix marking the past participle. This treatment is not satisfactory because (a) not all past participles always took a *ge-* prefix; (b) other verb forms, especially the past tense, sometimes appeared with a *ge-* prefix; (c) some verbs had *ge-* throughout the entire conjugation; and (d) other parts of speech, sometimes not even derived from verbs, appeared with the *ge-* prefix.

in OE, it had coalesced completely with the dative in nouns. Therefore, OE nouns had only four cases. Like the gender system, the OE case system had weaknesses that would contribute to its eventual loss. The accusative was particularly feeble, always identical to the nominative in the plural, but also in the singular for many classes of nouns. All the oblique (nonnominative) cases of weak nouns except for the neuter singular accusative were identical in the singular, and the neuter accusative singular was the same as the nominative singular.

Except for the nominative-accusative of weak nouns (only about 10 percent of OE nouns), the singular-plural distinction is well preserved in OE—and of course is still strong in PDE. Indeed, the number distinction in English has managed to accommodate and preserve, at least for educated speakers, rather a large number of irregular plurals borrowed from other languages (*crisis/crises*; *fungus/fungi*; *stratum/strata*, and so on).

In addition to being inflected for gender, case, and number, each OE noun belonged to one of several classes. By far the most important of these classes in terms of number of members are the vocalic *-a* stem masculine and neuter nouns, the corresponding vocalic *-o* stem feminine nouns, and the consonantal *-an* declension. The *-a* and *-o* declensions are also often called “strong” nouns; the *-an* declensions are called “weak” nouns. (These labels are not especially satisfactory because they describe a pre-OE stage that was no longer apparent by OE times. Nevertheless, because they are the traditional terms, we use them here.)

Table 5.5 gives the entire declension for *-a* and *-o* stem nouns and for *-an* nouns. The numerous minor declensions are not listed; even in OE times, they tended to overlap with and gravitate toward the larger declensional classes. The declension of nouns with mutated plurals is, however, included. Although this class was small even in OE, a number of mutated plurals have survived to the present day, partly because these nouns were so familiar and so frequently used.

Note that the OE masculine nominative-accusative *-a* stem plural (*-as*) has generalized to all regular plurals in PDE, and that the masculine-neuter genitive singular *-es* has generalized to all possessives, singular and plural. To put it another way, all the noun declensions ending in *-s* have survived and extended their domain, while almost all the other OE inflectional endings of nouns have been lost. OE *cildru* ‘children’ belonged to a very small minor class of neuter nouns having a plural in *-ru*; the /r/ has survived in PDE, but an additional weak *-n* plural has been added, giving PDE *children* a double plural. PDE *oxen* retains its weak plural but has lost its mutated vowel (OE *oxa*, pl. *exen*). Finally, OE *broþor* ‘brother’ had an unmarked nominative-accusative plural (*broþor*), but has since developed an alternative mutated weak plural (*brethren*) in addition to its PDE regular plural *brothers*.

The unmarked plural of OE long neuter *-a* stems has not only been preserved in some of the words in which it occurred in OE but has actually extended its domain to some words that had other kinds of plurals in OE. *Folk* has an uninflected plural in some usages and regularly in compounds (*kinfolk*, *menfolk*). The unmarked plurals of *sheep* and *deer* reflect the OE plurals *scēap* and *dēor*, and the category has been extended to other kinds of nouns referring to game animals. For example, though *fish* and *elk* today have unmarked plurals,

OE *fisc* ‘fish’ and *eolh* ‘elk’ were both masculine nouns with plurals in *-as*. PDE *moose* is not even a native word, but a loanword from Algonquian; it also follows the unmarked plural pattern of *sheep*.

Adjectives

The adjective was the most highly inflected of any Old English part of speech. Like the noun, it was marked for gender, case, and number—all determined by the noun or pronoun that the adjective modified. Adjectives also could take comparative and superlative endings. Finally, OE preserved the Germanic innovation of two separate “weak” and “strong” declensions for each adjective.

As Table 5.6 shows, OE adjective declensions were not identical to those of nouns. Rather, they shared characteristics of both noun and pronoun declensions.

Old English adjectives had no phrasal comparative parallel to PDE *more* and *most*. Regardless of the number of syllables in the stem, the comparative ended in *-ra* and the superlative in either *-ost(a)* or *-(e)st(a)*. A few adjectives had totally irregular comparatives and superlatives, all of which have remained irregular to the present day (the words for “good,” “a little,” “much,” and “bad”). A number of common adjectives had *i*-mutation in the comparative and superlative forms (such as *strang* ‘strong,’ *strengra*, *strengest*). Of them, only *elder*, the alternative comparative of *old* in PDE, has survived (OE *eald*, *yldra*, *yldest*).

The “weak” or definite declension of an adjective was used when the noun it modified was accompanied by a demonstrative (“this, that”), an ordinal numeral, or a possessive pronoun. Otherwise, the “strong” or indefinite declension was used. OE had no indefinite article at all and no definite article separate from the demonstrative for “that,” but these definite and indefinite declensions served, to some extent, a similar function. The definite endings helped to particularize the

W 5.16

TABLE 5.6 OE Adjective Declensions

Case		Indefinite (Strong)			Definite (Weak)		
		Masc.	Neut.	Fem.	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.
Sg.	N	blind	blind	blind*	blinda	blinde	blinde
	A	blindne	blind	blinde	blindan	blinde	blindan
	G	blindes	blindes	blindre	blindan	blindan	blindan
	D	blindum	blindum	blindre	blindan	blindan	blindan
	I	blinde	blinde	blindre	blindan	blindan	blindan
Pl.	NA	blinde	blind*	blinda(-e)	blindan	blindan	blindan
	G	blindra	blindra	blindra	blindra*	blindra*	blindra*
	D	blindum	blindum	blindum	blindum	blindum	blindum

*Adjectives with a short root syllable differ only in having a final *-u* in the feminine nominative singular and the neuter nominative-accusative plural. The genitive plural of the definite declension had an alternative ending in *-ena* (instead of *-ra*).

noun being modified (*þæt gōde scip* ‘the good ship’), whereas the indefinite endings indicated that no specific member of a class was meant (*gōd scip* ‘a good ship’).

In PDE, we frequently use a noun as a modifier of another noun without changing its form (*army knife*, *state court*), but only under highly restricted circumstances can we use an adjective for a noun without changing the form of the adjective. In OE, the situation was reversed. Today we can say *law book* but not **to the bloody*; OE could say *to þæm blodigan* ‘to the bloody (one)’ but not **lagu boc* (*law book*). OE either had to make a compound noun or to decline the modifying noun in some way, such as *laga boc* ‘a book of laws,’ where the modifying noun is in the genitive plural.

Pronouns

W 5.14
and
W 5.15

Personal Pronouns Of all the word classes of English today, by far the most conservative are the personal pronouns. Only the personal pronouns have retained three cases (subject, object, and possessive; corresponding to OE nominative, accusative–dative, and genitive). Indeed, as an examination of Table 5.7 will reveal, Present-Day English has lost only three of the inflectional distinctions made in OE. The first distinction, between dative and accusative, was collapsing even in OE, where it was clearly and consistently retained only in the third person. Also in PDE—but not until PDE—the distinction between singular and plural in the second person has been neutralized everywhere except in the reflexive and intensive pronoun (*yourself/yourselfs*). Finally, PDE has lost the category of dual. Here again, the category existed only in the first and second persons in

TABLE 5.7 OE Personal Pronouns

First Person		Singular	Dual	Plural
N		īc	wit	wē
A		mē, mec	unc (uncit)	ūs (ūsic)
G		mīn	uncer	ūre (ūser)
D		mē	unc	ūs
Second Person		Singular	Dual	Plural
N		þū	git	gē
A		þē, þec	inc (incit)	ēow (īow, ēowic)
G		þīn	incer	ēower (īower)
D		þē	inc	ēow (īow)
Third Person	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Plural
N	hē	hēo (hīe, hī, hīo)	hit	hīe (hī, hȳ, hīo)
A	hine (hiene)	hīe (hī, hȳ)	hit	hīe (hī, hȳ, hīo)
G	his	hiere (hire, hyre)	his	hiera (hira, hyra, heora)
D	him	hiere (hire, hyre)	him	him (heom)

OE. Further, it was not an obligatory category even then.³ In most OE texts, the regular plural (*we*, *us*, and so on) is used to refer to the speaker and one other person, and the dual (*wit*) is used primarily to emphasize the “twoness” of the situation.

As Table 5.7 shows, gender distinctions in OE pronouns are preserved only in the third-person singular, as in PDE. All of the surviving OE pronouns are recognizable today. The PDE third-person plural pronouns in *th-* are ME borrowings from Old Norse. PDE *she* is not a regular development of OE *hēo*; the precise origin of *she* is uncertain.

In some ways, PDE actually has a more complex pronominal system than OE. We have distinct forms for possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns (*my/mine*; *their/theirs*, and so on). In OE, the genitive forms served as both adjective and pronoun.⁴ For example, *his* meant “of him” and “his.” Further, OE had no separate reflexive pronouns. Instead, either the dative or the accusative forms of the regular personal pronouns were used to express reflexivity, a practice that still survives in some PDE dialects (“I got *me* a big stick”). OE did have the word *self*, but it was an intensifying pronoun, not a reflexive.

Several of the OE personal pronouns had numerous variant spellings; in fact Table 5.7 lists only some of the variants. On the other hand, pronouns such as *hē*, *his*, *wē*, and *mē* are almost always spelled the same way in all manuscripts.

Demonstrative Pronouns Unlike PDE, OE had no separate definite article. Instead, the pronoun/adjective corresponding to PDE *that* served not only as a demonstrative but also as a marker of “definiteness,” although it was frequently not employed where PDE would require a definite article and, conversely, was sometimes employed where PDE would not use an article or demonstrative. The OE demonstrative was fully declined for four cases (plus a separate masculine-neuter singular form for the instrumental case), two numbers, and three genders in the singular. All these forms have, of course, merged in PDE to one singular *that*, derived from the OE neuter nominative-accusative, and a somewhat irregularly derived plural *those*.

As Table 5.8 shows, OE also had a demonstrative corresponding to PDE *this*. In origin an emphatic pronoun, it often served an emphatic function in OE but also was used in roughly the same way as it is in PDE to indicate nearness to the speaker. Again, PDE preserves only the singular *this*, based on the OE neuter singular nominative-accusative, and the plural *these*, an irregular development not based on any of the OE plural forms.

3. Traces of a once much more extensive dual system survive in such English words as *both*, *either*, *or*, *neither*, *nor*, and *whether*. Further, the semantic reality of “dualness” is reflected in a number of PDE nouns that refer to single objects but that have grammatically only plural forms: *trousers*, *shorts*, *eyeglasses*, *shears*, *scissors*, *suspenders*, *pliers*, and the like.

4. Possessives could also be declined as adjectives. Take the genitive form (*mīn*, *uncer*, *ūre*, *þīn*, *incer*, *eowēr*, *his*, *hiere*, *hiera*) and add masculine strong endings.

TABLE 5.8 OE Demonstrative Pronouns

Case	“that, the”				“this”			
	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.	Plural	Masc.	Neut.	Fem.	Plural
N	se	þæt	sēo	þā	þes	þis	þēos	þās
A	þone	þæt	þā	þā	þisne	þis	þās	þās
G	þæs	þæs	þære	þāra (þæra)	þisses	þisses	þisse	þissa
D	þæm (þām)	þæm (þām)	þære	þæm (þām)	þissum	þissum	þisse	þissum
I	þȳ, þon	þȳ, þon	þære	þæm	þȳs	þȳs	þisse	þissum

TABLE 5.9 OE Interrogative Pronouns (Singular Only)

Case	Masculine-Feminine	Neuter
Nominative	hwā	hwæt
Accusative	hwone	hwæt
Genitive	hwæs	hwæs
Dative	hwæm, hwām	hwæm, hwām
Instrumental	hwȳ, hwon, hwī	hwȳ, hwon, hwī

Interrogative Pronouns Table 5.9 shows that the OE interrogative pronoun had already lost any number distinction and had collapsed the three-way gender distinction into two, “human” versus “nonhuman.” Of the six forms in OE, all but the accusative *hwone* have survived, with some irregularities in development, in PDE *who*, *what*, *whose*, *whom*, and the adverbial *why* (based on the OE instrumental form).

Other Pronouns Old English had no relative pronoun (*that*, *which*) as such. Instead, it (a) used much less subordination than written PDE, (b) used an indeclinable particle *þe* as a relative, (c) occasionally used the personal pronouns alone as relatives, or (d) combined the personal pronouns with the particle *þe*.

Old English had a full range of indefinite pronouns/adjectives, which are the direct ancestors of the PDE indefinite pronouns. A few examples are OE *ælc* ‘each’, *hwilc* ‘which’, *ænig* ‘any’, *eall* ‘all’, *nān* ‘none’, and *swilc* ‘such’. OE *sum* ‘some’ often served as a kind of indefinite article, corresponding roughly to the PDE unstressed use of *some* in such sentences as “Some man came by to see you today.” OE *man* was a useful indefinite pronoun that has since been lost from the language. It corresponded in meaning to PDE *one* but was not restricted to formal styles. Most indefinite pronouns took the indefinite adjective declension; some were invariable in form.

Verbs

PDE verbs are normally classified into two broad groups, regular and irregular. Regular verbs form their past tense and past participle without a change in the root vowel, by adding /d/, /t/, or /əd/ in both the past tense (worked) and the

past participle (have worked). This rough-and-ready bipartite classification is not suitable for Old English, where many of the verbs treated as irregular today were actually regular. Old English had three major types of verb conjugation: strong, weak, and other. The terms “strong” and “weak” are traditional and should not be understood as implying a value judgment.

Strong Verbs As Table 5.10 shows, Old English had seven subclasses of strong verbs, varying in membership from a handful of common verbs (Class 4) to scores of verbs. All seven classes had in common the indication of past tense and past participle by a change in the stem vowel (or ablaut). The first five classes had originally all had the same vowels, but different environments had altered these vowels in different ways. Class 6 verbs had had a different set of stem vowels. Class 7 verbs originally did not even belong to the ablaut series but had been “reduplicating verbs” in IE, verbs that formed their past tense by repeating the root syllable. By OE, the reduplication had been lost, and the class had merged with the ablaut verbs. As Table 5.10 shows, the infinitives of Class 7 verbs had various vowels, but the vowel of the past participle was the same as that of the infinitive.

Strong verbs in OE had four principal parts—infinitive, past singular, past plural, and past participle, each part defined by characteristic stem vowels. From these four parts, all other forms could be predicted. As Table 5.10 illustrates for

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TABLE 5.10 OE Strong Verb Classes

Ablaut Series	Infinitive	3d Sg. Pres.	3d Sg. Pret.	Plur. Pret.	Past Part.
<i>Class 1</i>					
ī-ā-i-i	scīnan ‘shine’	scīnp	scān	scinon	(ge)scinen
<i>Class 2</i>					
ēo-ēa-u-o	smēocan ‘smoke’	smycp	smēac	smucon	(ge)smocen
<i>Class 3</i>					
(a) i-a-u-u	singan ‘sing’	singp	sang	sungon	(ge)sungen
(b) e-ea-u-o	meltan ‘melt’	milt	mealt	multon	(ge)molten
(c) eo-ea-u-o	steorfan ‘die’	styrfp	stearf	sturfon	(ge)storfen
<i>Class 4</i>					
e-æ-æ-o	stelan ‘steal’	stilp	stael	stælon	(ge)stolen
<i>Class 5</i>					
e-æ-æ-e	sprecan ‘speak’	spricp	spræc	spræcon	(ge)sprecen
<i>Class 6</i>					
a-ō-ō-a	scacan ‘shake’	scæcp	scōc	scōcon	(ge)scacen
<i>Class 7</i>					
(a) V ₁ -ēo-ēo-V ₁	sāwan ‘sow’	sāwþ	sēow	sēowon	(ge)sāwen
(b) V ₁ -ē-ē-V ₁	slæpan ‘sleep’	slæpþ	slēp	slēpon	(ge)slæpen

Classes 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7, the stem vowel of the second- and third-person present indicative regularly underwent mutation because of an earlier /i/ in the personal endings. Most of the classes had, not surprisingly, irregularities of one sort or another in some of their members, but the details of these need not concern us here.

Of the three hundred or so strong verbs in OE, many have been totally lost by PDE (such as *þēon* ‘to prosper’; *(ge)limpan* ‘to happen’; *þiggan* ‘to receive’). Many more have become weak verbs (*scūfan* ‘to shove’; *murnan* ‘to mourn’; *wascan* ‘to wash’). Still others have changed class membership or developed irregularly. For all surviving strong verbs, the number of principal parts has been reduced from four to three as the distinction between singular and plural has been lost in the preterite (i.e., the past).

The fate of the verbs illustrated in Table 5.10 mirrors the general pattern of change in strong verbs between OE and PDE. Class 1 *scīnan* has held up fairly well, although the vowel of the past participle has generalized to that of the preterite singular; if the development had been absolutely regular, we would have *shine*, *shone*, *shin* today. Class 2 *smēocan* has become a weak verb. Class 3 *singan* is well preserved; in fact, of all the OE strong verb classes, Class 3 has kept its identity the best and has the largest representation in PDE. Among surviving Class 3 verbs in PDE are *begin*, *bind*, *cling*, *drink*, *find*, *grind*, *run*, *sing*, *spring*, *stink*, *swell*, *swim*, and *swing*. Class 4 *stelan* also remains strong, though it has generalized the past participle vowel to the past tense. Class 5 *sprecan* has been lost entirely, giving way to its OE alternative form *specan*. Class 6 *scacan* has developed completely regularly. Class 7 *sāwan* has become weak in the past tense (*sowed*) and today has an alternative weak past participle (*sowed* or *sown*). The other Class 7 verb illustrated in Table 5.10, *slāpan*, has become a weak verb: the differing vowels in the infinitive and past result from a Middle English sound change; the fact that /t/ is added to form the past tenses is evidence of its move to the class of weak verbs.

Despite the great attrition among OE strong verbs over the years, the category has resisted total annihilation, primarily because so many of the verbs are common ones, learned early and used frequently. Indeed, English has occasionally even added to the category. For example, OE *werian* ‘to wear’ and *hringan* ‘to ring’ were both weak in OE but have since become strong. Even a few borrowed verbs have entered English as strong verbs. For example, *dig* and *strive* came from Old French. *Fling*, *get*, and *take* from Scandinavian and *sling* from either Scandinavian or Low German were probably all strong verbs in their original languages, so it is less surprising that they appear as strong verbs in English.

Weak Verbs In terms of sheer numbers, there were far more weak verbs than strong verbs in OE. These weak verbs, descendants of the Germanic innovation of the dental preterite, were eventually to become the “regular” verbs of English. OE had several subtypes of weak verbs, depending on the length of the stem syllable and the presence or absence of -i- in the infinitive. As Table 5.11 shows, the subtypes varied slightly in their personal endings, but all shared the /d/ or /t/ in the past tense and past participle. A few OE weak verbs had i-mutation in the

TABLE 5.11 OE Verb Conjugations

		Strong	Weak Ia	Weak Ib	Weak II	"to be"	
Infinitive		clēofan	fremman	bærnan	lōcian	wesan	bēon
		‘cleave’	‘do’	‘burn’	‘look’		
Present Tense							
Indicative	Sg. 1	clēofe	fremme	bærne	lōcie	eom	bēo
	2	clȳfst	fremest	bærnst	lōcast	eart	bist
	3	clȳfþ	fremeþ	bærnþ	lōcaþ	is	biþ
	Pl.	clēofaþ	fremmaþ	bærnaþ	lōciaþ	sind(on)	bēoþ
Subjunctive	Sg.	clēofe	fremme	bærne	lōcie	sȳ	bēo
	Pl.	clēofen	fremmen	bærnen	lōcien	sȳn	bēon
Imperative	Sg. 2	clēof	freme	bærn	lōca	wes	bēo
	Pl. 2	clēofaþ	fremmaþ	bærnaþ	lōciaþ	wesaþ	bēoþ
Present Participle		clēofende	fremmende	bærnende	lōciende	wesende	bēonde
Preterite Tense							
Indicative	Sg. 1,3	clēaf	fremede	bærnde	lōcode	wæs	
	Sg. 2	clufe	fremedest	bærndest	lōcodeſt	wære	
	Pl.	clufon	fremedon	bærndon	lōcodon	wæron	
Subjunctive	Sg.	clufe	fremede	bærnde	lōcode	wære	
	Pl.	clufen	fremeden	bærnden	lōcoden	wæren	
Past Participle		-clofen	-fremed	-bærned	-lōcod	-bēon	

infinitive but not in the past or past participle, and several of them survive as irregular verbs today (*sell, tell, buy*). Note that, despite the different vowels in the past tense, they are weak verbs because they have the dental preterite.

Other Verbs Some of the most common verbs of OE did not fit neatly into either the strong or the weak classification. Most irregular of all, as it still is today, was the verb "to be." An amalgam of several roots, OE "to be" had two present stems, one based on the infinitive *wesan* and the other on the infinitive *bēon*. Also anomalous were *dōn* 'do', *willan* 'want, wish', and *gān* 'go'.

Of particular interest are the OE **preterite-present verbs**, so called because the original present had fallen into disuse and the original strong (ablaut) preterite had taken on present meaning. A new weak (dental) preterite then developed to replace the earlier one that was now a present. Some of these preterite-present verbs were *sculan* 'have to', *cunnan* 'know', *magan* 'be able', *ic dearr* 'I dare', *āgan* 'have, own', and *þurfan* 'need'. A number of these verbs have since been lost, but the PDE modal auxiliaries *shall, can, may, dare, must, and ought* are all descendants of OE preterite-presents, although most have undergone semantic change. Note that, in PDE, the OE weak past tenses *should, could, might, must, and ought* have all once again acquired present-tense meanings, so much so that, to express the

notion of past with them, we normally have to use a perfect instead of a single past tense. That is, we cannot say “Yesterday I should go”; instead we have to say “Yesterday I should have gone.”

Table 5.11 presents the complete conjugation of an OE strong verb, three varieties of weak verbs, and the verb “to be.” As Table 5.11 shows, the inflectional endings for strong and weak verbs were similar, especially in the present tense. All OE verbs were inflected for tense, person, number, and mood, but *not* for voice; the inflected passive had been lost by the time of the first OE records, and a phrasal passive similar to that of PDE was used instead.

OE verbs were inflected for only two tenses, present and preterite. There was no future conjugation; rather the present was used to express future time, with adverbs added to avoid ambiguity. However, by late OE, *sculan* and *willan* often carried some sense of future time in addition to their basic meanings of obligation and desire. There was no systematically used progressive tense as we know it today. Old English did witness the beginnings of the phrasal perfect tense, using either “have” or “be” (for the passive) as the auxiliary with the past participle. Compound phrasal tenses like PDE future perfect passive “They will have been seen” simply did not exist.

OE infinitives were not preceded by “to”; the *-an* suffix was adequate to identify them as infinitives. Past participles usually—but not always—had a *ge-* prefix.

Uninflected Word Classes

In addition to the inflected word classes of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and verbs, OE had other, uninflected categories of words, including prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, and interjections.

Prepositions Because the case endings of OE made many syntactic relations clear, the language needed fewer prepositions than are used in PDE. Nonetheless, OE had a fairly wide assortment of prepositions, most of which have survived in PDE, and many of which have retained their basic meaning to this day: *tō*, *for*, *bē*, ‘by’, *in* (*on*), *under*, *ofer* ‘beyond’, *mid* ‘with’, *wip* ‘against’, *fram*, *geond* ‘throughout’, *þurh* ‘through’, *ymbe* ‘around’, *of* ‘from’. Most of them were derived from adverbs and could also be used as adverbs.

Conjunctions The OE supply of conjunctions was smaller than the wide array available in PDE, partly because OE used subordination less extensively than PDE does. Among the most widely used conjunctions were *and*, *ac* ‘but’, *gif* ‘if’, *þēah* ‘though’, and *forþæm* (*þe*) ‘because’. OE had, if anything, more correlative conjunctions than PDE. Among them were

opþe ... opþe	‘either ... or’	þonne ... þonne	‘when ... then’
ge ... ge	‘both ... and’	þȳ ... þȳ	‘the (more) ... the (more)’
þā ... þā	‘when ... then’	nū ... nū	‘now that’
nā ... nā	‘neither ... nor’	swā ... swā	‘just as ... so’;
			‘whether ... or’

An Unpopular Pedagogue

The first university course in Old English (Anglo-Saxon) was introduced in 1825 at the then newly opened University of Virginia; it had been included in the curriculum at the urging of Thomas Jefferson. The only English course offered at the university, it was taught by a Dr. Georg Blaettermann of Leipzig, who also taught French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Dr. Blaettermann was not popular with his students, who rioted on several occasions and once even pelted him with shot during a lecture. Their petitions for his dismissal were not successful, but he was finally removed from the university in 1840 for horsewhipping his wife in public.

SOURCE: Information taken from Stanley R. Hauer, "Thomas Jefferson and the Anglo-Saxon Language," *PMLA*, XCVIII: 5 (Oct. 1983), p. 891.

Adverbs In both OE and PDE, the term “adverb” is a catch-all for items that do not fit conveniently into any other word class. For OE, several broad sub-categories are recognizable, all of them with parallels in PDE. As in PDE, a number of words are classified either as adverbs or as prepositions, depending on their use in the clause. Chief among them are the time and place words like *ofer* ‘over’, *under*, *on*, *þurh* ‘through’, and *æfter*. A second type of adverb includes miscellaneous indeclinable words used only adverbially: *ne* ‘not’, *ēac* ‘also’, *nāfre* ‘never’, *hider* ‘hither’, and *tō* ‘too’. A third type of adverb was formed by attaching the useful suffix *-an* to other parts of speech in order to form adverbs with the general meaning “from that direction.” For example, *ēastan* meant “from the east,” *innan* meant “from within,” *feorran* meant “from afar,” and *sipþan* meant “from that time, afterwards.”

A fourth source of adverbs was the inflected forms of other parts of speech, especially genitive and dative forms. For example, from *eall* ‘all’, OE used the genitive singular *ealles* to mean “entirely.” From *gēar* ‘year’, there was *gēara* ‘of years’, meaning “formerly.” From the noun *hwīl* ‘time’, the dative plural *hwīlum* was used adverbially to mean “at times.” A number of such adverbs survive in PDE, though their genitive origins are no longer obvious: *twice*, *backwards*, *always*, *sometimes*, and so on.

By far the most numerous and productive category of adverbs was that of qualitative adverbs formed from adjectives simply by adding *-e* to the adjective stem or to the adjective stem plus *-lic*. For *riht* or *rihtlic* (both meaning “right”), the corresponding adverbs were *rihte* and *rihtlice*. For *beald* ‘bold’, the adverbial form was *bealdlice*. Old English *-lic* (PDE *-ly*) was originally an adjective suffix, and it survives in many PDE adjectives (*friendly*, *homely*, *earthly*). But since it has become the standard way of forming an adverb, it is no longer productive for making new adjectives in PDE.

Interjections Like any other natural language, OE must have had a number of conventional interjections parallel to PDE *oh*, *ouch*, *dammit*, and the like. Interjections are not the sort of things that easily make their way into texts, however, so we know few of what probably was once a wide range of interjections. *Lā*

meant “oh!” “ah!” *Ēalā* and *wā lā wā*, both meaning “alas,” appear occasionally. OE *huxet lā* corresponded roughly to PDE *what!* In his *Grammar*, Ælfric tells us that *ha ha* and *he he* indicate laughter *on leden and on englisc* ‘in Latin and in English’, showing that this onomatopoeic interjection is as old as the language itself.

OLD ENGLISH SYNTAX

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Word order in Old English, at least compared with that in Present-Day English, was relatively free. The speaker or writer of Old English had more options than we do today as to where to place such elements as direct objects with respect to other elements in the sentence. However, OE never had the syntactical freedom of a language like Classical Latin, and there were definite “favorite” phrase, clause, and sentence patterns that were followed quite consistently, especially in prose. Further, most of these patterns were the same as those of PDE. For example, a word-for-word translation of the following sentence from Alfred’s *Orosius* (c. 895) produces a completely idiomatic PDE sentence.

Hē sǣde ðæt Norðmanna land wære swýþe lang and swýþe smæl.
He said that (the) Northmen’s land was very long and very narrow.

Syntax within Phrases

Noun Phrases As in PDE, modifiers in OE tended to be close to the words they modified. Single-word adjectivals generally preceded their nouns.

þa beorhtan steorran	wlance wīgsmīpas
<i>The bright stars</i>	<i>proud warriors</i>

This order could, however, be reversed, especially in poetry. Titles used with proper names normally followed the name, and adjectives modifying nouns used in direct address often did.

bearn unweaxen	Ælfrēd cyning	Fæder ure
<i>boy youthful</i>	<i>Alfred king</i>	<i>father our</i>

When a noun had two modifiers, sometimes one preceded the noun and one followed. If the modifiers were connected by *and*, both frequently followed the noun.

mīne þegnas twēgen	ān fæt fyðer scyte and brād
<i>my servants two</i>	<i>a vessel four-cornered and broad</i>

As in PDE, adjectival modifiers consisting of an entire phrase or clause normally followed the words they modified.

hlāford ofer alle hlāforden
<i>lord over all lords</i>

hie us gelæddon þurh þa lond þe þa unarefnedlican cyn nædrena
they guided us through the land that the intolerable kind of snakes

& hrifra wildeora wæron
and fierce wild beasts were in

However, a number of basic characteristics of adjectival modification in PDE were totally lacking in OE. Noun adjuncts, the use of one or more nouns to modify another without any change in the form (*bicycle chain, student teacher, input device, risk factors*), did not appear because a modifying noun was always inflected. Possessives (genitives) were also always inflected; there was no possessive with *of*. The group possessive, in which all the elements serve to modify the noun (*the people next-door's house*), was not to appear for several hundred years. Comparative and superlative adjectives were always inflected; *more* and *most* were adjectives, adverbs, or pronouns, but never markers of comparison. Except for the group possessive, all of these features of PDE are those of an analytic language; OE was still highly synthetic.

Adverbial Modifiers Again like PDE, adverbial modifiers in OE were freer in their placement than adjectives. In general, however, they tended to precede the words they modified. The adverb *ne* always came directly before the verb it negated.

þises goðdspelles geendung is swīðe ondrādenlic
this gospel's ending is very terrifying
 se cynincg ne sceall arīsan of ðām bedde
the king not shall arise from the bed

In OE, the taboo against double negatives had not yet been invented, and multiple negatives are common.

Ne ūre nænig his līf ne fadode swā swā he scolde ... and nāðer ne
Not of us none his life not arranges as he ought to and neither not
 heoldan ne lāre ne lage ne manna swā swā we scoldan
(we) observe neither teaching nor law nor of men as we ought to

Prepositional Phrases As in PDE, prepositions in OE generally preceded their objects.

æt his hlaforðes fotum sittan
at his lord's feet to sit
On þissum gēare cōm Harold cyng of Eoferwic to Westmynstre
In this year came Harold king from York to Westminster

However, prepositions also frequently followed their objects, especially if the object was a pronoun. PDE of course has lost this freedom of placement, but the inverted position does survive in a few idioms such as *dance the night away*.

and cwæð þā æt nēxtan cynlice him to, “Ēalā þū bisceop ...”
and said then finally regally him to, “Oh, you bishop”
 and ferde him togeanes mid þam folce
and marched him against with the people

Verb Phrases Old English lacked the rich and complex system of verb phrases that characterizes PDE; a phrase like *I should have been traveling* would have been impossible. There was no regular progressive tense (*I am traveling*), and the perfect tense (*I have traveled*) was only just beginning to appear in its current function. The much wider use of the subjunctive in OE replaced to some extent the verb phrases of today. For example, where PDE has *if I had been*, OE could use *gif ic wære* (*If I were*; past subjunctive). In general, though, adverbs and context substituted for the multiword verb phrases of PDE.

Impersonal verbs (those without an expressed nominative subject) are almost totally unfamiliar in PDE but were common in OE, where they frequently were accompanied by a dative or accusative reflexive pronoun.

him limpð oft æfter hiora āgnum willan
(to) them happens often according to their own desire

Ðam men ðe hine ne lyst his metes
(to) the man who does not want his food

A survival in PDE of this once-common construction is the archaic *methinks* (literally, “(it) thinks to me”), which most modern speakers probably construe as a quaint and ungrammatical way of saying “I think.” Weather verbs, such as *it snowed yesterday*, are also impersonal. To some extent, PDE has substituted the use of *there* and *it* for the OE impersonal verbs (“It seems to me the color has changed”; “There’s a unicorn in the garden”). OE never used *there* in this way and used *it* as a dummy subject less frequently than PDE does.

Old English also never used *to* to mark the infinitive; the *-an* ending of the infinitive provided sufficient identification. OE did use *do* as a pro-verb to substitute for an entire verb phrase:

Harold cyng ... gegædrade swā micelne sciphære and ēac landhere,
Harold king gathered such (a) large navy and also army
 swā nān cyng hēr on lande ær ne dyde
as no king here in land before not did

However, *do* was never used in OE to form the negative or interrogative. A verb was negated simply by putting *ne* before it, and interrogatives were formed by inverting the subject and the verb.

Hē cwæp þæt nān man ne būde be norðan him.
He said that no man not lived to (the) north (of) him.
 Hwilce fixas gefēhst þu?
Which fishes catch you? (Which fish do you catch?)

Syntax within Clauses

If we take the basic elements of a clause as subject (S), verb (V), and object/complement (O), then there are six theoretically possible orders in which these elements may occur: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, and OVS. All of these orders occurred, at least occasionally, in Old English. Nonetheless, order of elements was by no means random; in fact, word order in OE was in many ways similar to that of PDE. In particular, the subject usually preceded the verb. The favorite order in independent declarative clauses was SVO, as it remains in PDE.

and mæsse-prēost āsinge fēower mæssan ofer þān turfon
and (the) mass priest (should) sing four masses over (the) turves

Sēo stōw is gehāten Heofonfeld on Englisc
That place is called Heavenfield in English

Se fērde on his iugoðe fram frēondum and māgum tō Scotlande on sǣ
He went in his youth (away) from friends and relatives to Scotland by sea

However, in dependent clauses, the typical order was SOV. Indeed, the SOV order was common even in independent clauses when the object was a pronoun.

for ðan Ælmær hī becyrde
because Elmer them betrayed

ond hē hine sōna to þære abbudissan gelædde
and he him at once to the abbess led

This SOV order is virtually impossible in PDE, though it survives marginally in verse and song lyrics (“while I the pipes did play”).

The order VSO was the rule in interrogative clauses and imperative clauses with an expressed subject. It was normal, but not universal, in declarative clauses preceded by an adverbial. An adverbial is a word (adverb) or a group of words (an adverbial phrase or an adverbial clause) that modifies the verb.

Interrogative Hæfst ðu hafocas? ... Canst ou temman hafocas? ... Hwæt
Have you hawks? Know how you to tame hawks? What
 secge wē be þām cōce?
say we about the cook?

Imperative Ne sleh þū, Abraham, þīn āgen bearn
Not slay you, Abraham, your own son

Preceded by Adverbial Eall þis gear wunode se cyng Henri on Normandig
All this year stayed King Henry in Normandy

Ðā cwæþ se fæder tō his þēowum ...
Then said the father to his servants

Ond þā se here eft hāmweard wende
And then the army again homeward turned (no inversion of S and V)

Of these three types of constructions, PDE regularly has inversion in interrogatives (“Why do you say that?” “Can he play backgammon?”). The VSO order is

A Pagan Charm

Paganism did not disappear absolutely and immediately upon the introduction of Christianity to England. Among the surviving pagan customs for which direct evidence remains are a series of charms. Some of them have a veneer of Christianity overlying the basic paganism; others lack even the veneer. The charms are against such diverse evils as infertile land, delayed childbirth, the “water-elf-disease,” swarming of bees, theft of cattle, a wen (fatty cyst), and the following charm (here translated into modern English) against a sudden stitch.

For a sudden stitch, a good remedy is feverfew and real nettle, which grows throughout the place, and plantain. Boil in butter.

Loud they were, oh! Loud, when they rode over the hill;
They were fierce when they rode over the land.
Shield yourself so that now you can survive attack!
Out, little spear, if it be here-in!

I stood under a linden, under a light shield,
Where the mighty women prepared their powers
And they sent forth screaming spears.
I will send another back to them,
A flying arrow directly back.
Out, little spear, if it be here in!

The smith sat, forged a little knife,
Wondrously crafted of iron.
Out, little spear, if it be here-in!

Six smiths sat, made deadly spears.
Out, little spear, not at all within, spear!

If there be here-in any piece of iron
The work of a witch, it must melt.
If you were shot in the skin or were shot in the flesh
Or were shot in the blood
Or were shot in a limb, may your life never be injured;
If it were shot by gods or it were shot by elves
Or it were shot by a witch, now I will help you.

This is a remedy to you against the shot of gods; this is a remedy to you against
the shot of elves,

This is a remedy to you against the shot of a witch. I will help you.

Fly there to the mountain-head.

Be healthy! The Lord help you!

Then take the knife; put it in the liquid.

SOURCE: Translated by C. M. Millward from “For a Sudden Stitch” (MS. Harley 585), in Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), pp.122–23.

obligatory in PDE after a preceding *negative* adverbial (“Never have I seen such a mess”; “Rarely does the class begin on time”), and is a familiar stylistic variant after other adverbials, especially of direction or position (“Here comes the rain”; “On the table was a yellow cat”). In imperatives, PDE normally does not include a subject; but when it does, the order is SVO (“You eat your porridge!”), except in the idiom *mind you*.

The three remaining possible orders of OSV, OVS, and VOS all appear in OE texts but are relatively rare, especially in prose. They seem to have been stylistic variants used primarily to emphasize the object or complement, though they also offered convenient metrical options to poets.

OVS	Fela spella him sǣdon þā Beormas <i>Many stories (to) him told the Karelians.</i>
OSV	bēot hē gelāste <i>vow he fulfilled</i>

Strained as these examples may appear to the modern ear or eye, both are still used in certain circumstances in PDE. Fronting of an object (putting the object first in the sentence) or complement for emphasis is common in PDE, though perhaps more in speech than in writing (“Time I have, money I don’t”). Even the seemingly bizarre order OVS is acceptable in PDE if the object is both negated (which provides the stimulus for inverting S and V) and emphasized (“No evidence have I seen to support that assumption”). In written, though not in spoken, PDE, the OVS order is conventional in reporting direct speech (“‘I don’t care,’ said Beulah.”).

Syntax of Sentences

For the most part, the structure of entire sentences in OE prose was much looser than we would find elegant today—more like the typical sentence structures of spoken PDE; today’s composition teachers would mark OE sentences “rambling” or “run-on.” Old English syntax is paratactic (lacking subordinating conjunctions); PDE syntax is hypotactic (characterized by the use of dependent and subordinate clauses). There was much less of the complex subordination that characterizes careful PDE prose; clauses within the sentence tended to be linked simply by the conjunctions *and* and *þā* ‘then.’ Although OE used such basic subordinating conjunctions as *þā* ‘when,’ *gif* ‘if,’ and *for þan* ‘because,’ it lacked the rich array of subordinating conjunctions that PDE has, and the relative pronoun system was poorly developed.

One of the reasons why OE sentences were generally loose and cumulative in structure was the lack of models for tighter, more hypotactic structures. Although most writers were familiar with Latin, its grammar differed so much from OE grammar that its structures simply could not be transferred wholesale into English. Indeed, even in glosses, where scribes “translated” Latin texts simply by writing an English equivalent over each Latin word, scribes often changed the original word order, apparently feeling that a word-for-word translation in such instances would be too distorted to be comprehensible to a native speaker of English.

The following sentence, from the entry for the year 893 in the Parker version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, is a fairly typical example of the loose but generally lucid style of unselfconscious OE prose. The punctuation here is modern.

þā hīe gefēngon micle herehȳð ond þā woldon ferian norþweardes ofer
When they seized great plunder and it wanted to carry northward over

Temese, in on Ēastseaxe ongēan þā scipu, þā forrād sio fierd
Thames, into Essex toward the ships, then intercepted the army
 hīe foran ond him wið gefeaht æt Fearnhamme, ond þone here
them in front and them against fought at Farnham, and the (enemy) army
 gefliemde ond þā herehȳþa āhredden; ond hīe flugon ofer Temese
put to flight and the plunder rescued; and they fled over Thames
 būton ælcum forda, þā ūp be Colne on ānne iggað.
without any fords, then up along Colne (River) onto an islet.

The works of two writers, Wulfstan and the prolific Ælfric, were exceptions to the general rule of loose, rambling prose. Both men drew much of their conscious artistry from poetic devices, using, in particular, heavy alliteration and parallelism to embellish their styles. The following passage is from Wulfstan's famous bombastic sermon, "Sermo Lupi ad Anglos." In it, Wulfstan blames the English for their moral turpitude as a cause for the Viking invasions, a result of God's anger. Again, the punctuation is modern.

Hēr syndan mannsлагan and mægslagan and mæsserbanan and
Here are homicides and kinsmen-slayers and priest-killers and
 mynsterhatan, and hēr syndan mānsworan and morþorwyrhtan, and
church-persecutors, and here are perjurers and murderers, and
 hēr syndan myltestran and bearmmyrðran and fūle forlegene
here are harlots and infanticides and foul fornicated
 hōringas manege, and hēr syndan wiccan and wælcyrrian, and hēr
whores many, and here are witches and sorceresses, and here
 syndan rȳperas and rēaferas and woruldstrūderas, and hrædest
are robbers and thieves and plunderers, and most hastily
 is tō cweþenne, māna and misdæda ungerīm ealra.
is to say, wickedness and crimes countless number of all.

Note the heavy alliteration—Wulfstan even manages to use seven consecutive nouns all alliterating on /m/ at the beginning of the selection. Later he uses series of doublets linked both by *and* and by alliteration. So carefully has he chosen his words that coordinated nouns are of the same class and hence have the same endings, adding weak rhyme to the alliteration (*mannsлагan and mægslagan; rȳperas and rēaferas; māna and misdæda*). Extensive use of parallelism (*and hēr ... and hēr ... and hēr*) keeps what would otherwise be an overly long and cumbersome passage from getting out of hand. This style is a far cry from "naive" prose. If it seems a bit too ornate and overblown for modern tastes, we still must admire its craftsmanship and power.

The syntax of OE poetry was freer than that prose. One important option that poets exercised was an extensive use of apposition. Apposition is a grammatical construction in which two elements, normally noun phrases, are placed side by side, with one element modifying the other (*my friend Alice*). Appositive phrases in poetry could move relatively freely to fit the demands of the alliterative line, as this example from *Beowulf* illustrates.

	Lēoht ēastan cōm, <i>Light from east came</i>
beorht bēacen Godes, <i>bright beacon God's,</i>	brimu swaþredon, <i>waves subsided,</i>
þæt ic sǣnæssas <i>so that I headlands</i>	gesēon mihte, <i>see could,</i>
windige weallas, <i>windy walls.</i>	

Here, *beorht bēacen Godes* is in apposition to *Lēoht*, and *windige weallas* is in apposition to *sǣnæssas*. Note, however, that the basic S + V order of prose is preserved in the independent clauses (*Lēoht ēastan cōm*; *brimu swaþredon*) and that the adverb *ēastan* precedes the verb it modifies. In the dependent clause, the expected SOV order appears (*ic sǣnæssas gesēon mihte*).

Idioms and Latin Influence

All natural languages have idioms, constructions that do not fit the normal patterns of the language. Some OE idioms are still used; for example, what could be called the “correlative comparative” as illustrated by *the bigger, the better*, dates back to an OE idiom using the instrumental case. Old English nouns following a numeral, particularly numerals over three, often took the genitive plural: *twēntig gēara* ‘twenty years.’ Although the *-a* of the genitive plural was lost by the end of Middle English, making the noun identical with the singular, Standard English today still uses an uninflected noun after a numeral when the group is used attributively (*four-day wait, seven-year itch, ten-year-old girl*), rather than adding *-s* to the plural noun.

Many other OE idioms have been lost. For example, when an OE verb preceded its subject, the verb was often singular even if the subject was plural; in the phrase *gefeaht Æþerēd cýning ond Ælfrēd* ‘King Æþered and Ælfréd fought,’ the verb is singular. An idiom highly confusing to speakers of PDE can be illustrated by *eahta sum*, literally “of eight some,” but meaning “one of eight” or “one and seven others.”

As implied earlier, Latin syntax had little permanent influence on Old English syntax, even though most scribes were familiar with Latin. Nonetheless, a few Latinisms do appear, especially in direct translations from Latin. In particular, the occasional use in OE of a dative absolute is borrowed from the Latin ablative absolute. Present participles, rare in original OE writing, are more frequent in translations from Latin. The use of *nelle* (*ne* + *wille*) in negative imperatives is common in translations from Latin but never appears elsewhere; it is an obvious borrowing of Latin *noli*. For example, OE *nelle þu beon gedreht* ‘don’t be troubled’ translates Latin *noli vexari*.

OLD ENGLISH LEXICON

The Extensive Vocabulary

The vocabulary of Old English, although only a fraction of that of PDE, was rich indeed. Thousands of lexical items are found in OE texts, despite the fact that the majority of OE texts have not survived. It is impossible to estimate with any confidence the total size of the OE vocabulary.

W 5.21, W 5.22 and W 5.23

One of the explanations for the extraordinary richness of the surviving OE vocabulary is the nature of OE poetry. Because this verse was alliterative, a poet needed a variety of synonyms for the same concept in order to have a word that began with the right sound. In addition, OE poetry made extensive use of variation, or the repetition of the same idea in different words. This practice, too, required many synonyms. For example, to express the meaning of “messenger” alone, OE had at least the following words: *æboda*, *ārendraca*, *ārendsecg*, *ār*, *boda*, *engel*, *fērend*, *foreboda*, *forridel*, *rynel*, *sand*, *spellboda*, *wilboda*, and *yfelberende*. These terms were not complete synonyms—a *wilboda* brought good news and an *yfelberende* brought bad news, for instance—but, depending on the context, many of them were interchangeable for poetic purposes.

Hundreds of the surviving OE words appear only in poetry. However, this fact does not mean that the “poetic” words were totally unfamiliar in ordinary speech. In some cases, it is simply an accident that a word is recorded only in poetry and not in prose.

The great majority of “poetic” words were compounds, both elements of which often were used in prose as well as poetry. For example, *fīromæg* ‘free kinsman’ appears only in poetry, but both elements of this compound appear in non-poetic contexts: *fīreo* ‘free,’ *fīeolæta* ‘freedman,’ *fīeodōm* ‘freedom,’ and so on; and *mæg* ‘male kinsman,’ *mægburg* ‘family, tribe,’ *mægmyrðra* ‘parricide,’ and so on.

Loanwords

Most of the OE lexicon was native in origin and of two types, Indo-European or Germanic. The IE portion comprises those words found not only in Germanic languages but also in other IE languages (and not borrowed from one IE language into another). It includes the most essential vocabulary, such as the names of the numbers from 1 to 10, kinship terms for the nuclear family, and basic terms essential to any language, like the words meaning sun, water, to eat, head, movable property, tree, high, cold, flat, red, to stand, to have, to run, to laugh. The Germanic element consists of items either common to all branches of Germanic or to West Germanic alone, but not found in other IE languages. Some of the Common Germanic words in OE are *bæc* ‘back,’ *bān* ‘bone,’ *fōlc* ‘folk,’ *grund* ‘ground,’ *rotian* ‘to rot,’ *sēoc* ‘sick,’ *swellan* ‘to swell,’ *wērīg* ‘weary,’ and *wīf* ‘woman’. Common only to West Germanic are OE *brōc* ‘brook,’ *craflan* ‘to crave,’ *īdel* ‘idle,’ *cniht* ‘boy, knight,’ *sōna* ‘immediately,’ and *wēod* ‘weed.’

Celtic Influence Despite extensive contacts between Germanic and Celtic speakers on the Continent and both extensive and intensive contacts after the Anglo-Saxons came to England, OE had only a handful of loanwords from Celtic languages. Some of these were originally from Latin (late OE *cros* from Old Irish *cross* from Latin *crux*), and some had been borrowed while the Anglo-Saxons were still on the continent (OE *rīce* ‘kingdom’). Of the half dozen or so words apparently borrowed after the Anglo-Saxons came to England, only *bin* ‘storage box, crib’ and perhaps *hog* and *dun* ‘grayishbrown’ have survived in the standard language to the present day; a few others, such as *carr* ‘stone’ have sur-

vived in dialects only. Much more Celtic influence is shown in place names and place-name elements; *Thames*, *Dover*, *London*, *Cornwall*, *Carlisle*, and *Avon* are the most familiar of many surviving Celtic place names in Britain.

Scholars usually explain the lack of Celtic influence on English vocabulary as resulting from the fact that the Celts were a conquered people whose language would have had little prestige, and hence the English would have had little incentive to borrow vocabulary from them. While this is true, it is not a completely satisfactory explanation, particularly in view of the fact that, in other situations, conquerors have borrowed proportionally more vocabulary items from their subject populations. For example, the Romans borrowed scores of words from Germanic, and American English has retained well over a hundred words from the various American Indian languages. Even granting that the English colonists found more unfamiliar things to be named in the New World than the Anglo-Saxons found in England, the paucity of Celtic loans in OE is still puzzling.

Scandinavian Influence The extensive—and usually unpleasant—contact between the English and the Scandinavians began well within the Old English period. However, few certain Scandinavian loans appear in OE texts, partly because Old English and Old Norse were so similar that loans from Old Norse are not always easy to detect, partly because there would have been no prestige attached to the use of Scandinavian words, but primarily because there is always a lag between contact of two different languages and the assimilation of loanwords from one language into the other.

The few Old Norse words that do appear in OE texts often chronicle the relationship between the English and the Norse. Although the English themselves were no mean seamen, the Norse were even better, and so we find the Norse loans *hā* ‘rowlock’ and *cnearr* ‘kind of small ship’ in OE. *Orrest* ‘battle’ and *rān* ‘rapine’ reflect the context in which the English met the Norsemen. The structure of Norse society and social classes differed in many ways from that of the English; hence the loanwords *hofðing* ‘chief, leader’, *hold* ‘chief, notable’, *wearg* ‘felon’, and *hūscarl* ‘member of the king’s bodyguard’. Two or three dozen additional Old Norse words are recorded during the OE period, including such miscellaneous items as *āled* ‘firebrand’, *cenep* ‘moustache’, *flāh* ‘deceitful’, *mundlēow* ‘hand-washing basin’, *scynn* ‘skin, fur’, and *fōd* ‘wise’. However, the extensive influence of Old Norse (ON) on English was not to appear until Middle English.

Latin Influence The only major foreign influence on OE vocabulary was Latin, from which Old English had several hundred loanwords. The influence began in Common Germanic times, when such words as *belt*, *cheese*, *copper*, *linen*, and *pole* were borrowed. While the ancestors of the English were still on the Continent, West Germanic dialects borrowed many Latin words, including *beer*, *butter*, *cheap*, *dish*, *mile*, *pit*, *plum*, *shrive*, *sickle*, *stop*, *street*, *tile*, and *wine*. (PDE spellings are given; the OE spellings were usually somewhat different.)

Because the language of the Church was Latin, Christianization predictably brought Latin loanwords to English. Among the many Latin loans in OE relating to religious practice or intellectual life are the following.

<i>abbod</i> ‘abbot’	<i>capellan</i> ‘chaplain’	<i>prīm</i> ‘the first hour’
<i>alter</i> ‘altar’	<i>clūstor</i> ‘cloister’	<i>sācerd</i> ‘priest’
<i>calic</i> ‘chalice’	<i>fers</i> ‘verse’	<i>ðimiamā</i> ‘incense’
<i>candel</i> ‘candle’	<i>lētānā</i> ‘litany’	<i>traht</i> ‘tract’
<i>cantic</i> ‘canticle’	<i>mæsse</i> ‘mass’	<i>ymnere</i> ‘hymnbook’

The English, however, were also resourceful in adapting existing native words to express Christian concepts. For Latin *sanctus*, native *hālig* ‘holy’ was used; for Latin *deus*, native *god*; for Latin *dominus*, native *hlāford*. Native *gāst* translated Latin *spiritus*; *synn* served for Latin *peccatum*; and *biddan* ‘pray’ for Latin *orare*. Some of these ingenious translations may seem humorously irreverent to modern ears; for example, OE translated Epiphany as *bæddæg* ‘bath day’ because Epiphany was supposedly the day of Christ’s baptism.

The introduction of Christianity brought not just a new religion but also administrative personnel, monastic life, and various secular concepts and products previously unfamiliar in England. Consequently, OE borrowed many secular Latin terms as well as religious terms. Old English had an especially large number of borrowings for plant life—trees, fruits, vegetables, herbs, and flowers. A few examples are *ceder* ‘cedar’, *cerfelle* ‘chervil’, *peru* ‘pear’, *bēte* ‘beet’, *rædic* ‘radish’, *pollegie* ‘pennyroyal’, *lilie* ‘lily’, *latuce* ‘lettuce’, *senep* ‘mustard’, and *peonie* ‘peony’. Other Latin loans are too miscellaneous to be classified: *lamprede* ‘lamprey eel’, *fann* ‘fan’, *cancer* ‘cancer’, *gīgant* ‘giant’, *mūl* ‘mule’, *fals* ‘false’, *pyngan* ‘to prick’, and *ostre* ‘oyster’.

From the beginning, the English did not hesitate to hybridize by combining Latin roots with native prefixes or suffixes and by forming compounds consisting of one Latin and one English element. Thus OE *bemūtian* ‘to exchange for’ has an English prefix on a Latin stem (L. *mutare*). OE *candeltrēow* ‘candelabrum’ has a Latin first element and an English second element (*trēow* ‘tree’).

Latin influence on OE vocabulary is also occasionally reflected in **calques**, or loan translations, in which the semantic elements of a foreign word are translated element by element into the borrowing language. For example, Latin *unicornis* ‘unicorn’ was loan-translated as *ānhorn* ‘one horn’, and OE *tofealdan* ‘to come to land’ is a calque of Latin *applicare*. Probably the best-known OE calque is *godspell*, ‘gospel’, literally “good news,” from Latin *evangelium*.

The Latin loans from the Continental period had been exclusively oral. The earliest Latin loans from the missionary period were also heavily oral, but as literacy in Latin increased in England, more and more Latin loans came in through writing, especially during the Benedictine reform of the late tenth century. Many of these later loans were of a highly esoteric nature and often were not even anglicized by removal of Latin endings. Not surprisingly, many of these loans that smell of the cloister have not survived into PDE or were lost and then re-

introduced at a later date. A few examples are *carbunculus* ‘carbuncle’, *corōna* ‘crown’, *eclipsis* ‘eclipse’, *fenester* ‘window’, *paradīs* ‘paradise’, and *termen* ‘term’.

Formation of New Words

Every language has ways of creating new lexical items without resorting exclusively to borrowing or loan-translation. By the time of written OE, OE relied primarily on compounding and affixing to form new words, both devices inherited from IE and still widely used in PDE.

Compounding An occasional compound can be found among all parts of speech in OE, but the great majority of compounds are nouns or adjectives. The most common type of compound noun consists of two nouns; usually the first noun is not inflected.

noun + noun = noun	<i>sunbēam</i> ‘sunbeam’ <i>luftācen</i> ‘love token’ <i>þēohseax</i> ‘thigh sword’
adjective + noun = noun	<i>hēahsynn</i> ‘high sin, crime’ <i>ȝfelweorc</i> ‘evil deed’ <i>wīdsā</i> ‘open sea’
adverb + noun = noun	<i>efibōt</i> ‘again-healing’ (recuperation) <i>ongēanhwyrf</i> ‘backturn’ (return) <i>innefeoh</i> ‘inside property’ (household goods)

OE was innovative among Germanic languages in its occasional use of triple compounds: *winterrādingbōc* ‘lectionary for the winter’, *biterwyrtdrenc* ‘drink of bitter herbs’. Some types of compound nouns found in PDE, however, did not occur in OE. For example, OE did not have verb + adverb compounds (*hang-over*, *kickback*, *layout*, *buildup*, *go-between*); noun + verb compounds (*carwash*, *handshake*, *sunshine*); or verb + verb compounds (*hearsay*, *look-see*, *lend-lease*).

Compound adjectives in OE most often had an adjective as the second element. The first element was usually a noun or an adjective, less often an adverb. One type of compound adjective rare in PDE, the adjective + noun combination, was relatively common in OE.

noun + adjective = adjective	<i>dōmgeorn</i> ‘glory-eager’ <i>īsceald</i> ‘ice-cold’ <i>ālfscīene</i> ‘elf-bright’ (beautiful)
adjective + adjective = adjective	<i>wīshȳdig</i> ‘wise-minded’ <i>dēadboren</i> ‘stillborn’ <i>hēahstēap</i> ‘high-steep’ (very high)
adverb + adjective = adjective	<i>ofermōdig</i> ‘arrogant’ <i>ūplang</i> ‘upright’ <i>þurhhefig</i> ‘extremely heavy’

-bora, -ere, and -estre, of which -ere is still highly productive (*data inputter, banker, reviewer*), and -estre is marginally productive (*gangster, prankster*).

The most common adjective suffixes in OE were -ig (compare PDE *speedy*), -lic (PDE *manly*), -ful (*bountiful*), -lēas (*mindless*), -ed (*bow-legged*), -isc (*childish*), -sum (*handsome*), and the now-extinct -cund, -fæst, and -wende.

Many of the most frequent OE prefixes are still familiar and even productive today, including *un-*, *in-*, *ofer-* (*over-*), *æfter-*, *fore-*, *mis-*, *under-*, *ūp-*, and *ūt-* (*out-*). Still familiar but no longer productive are *ā-* (PDE *abide*), *be-* (*become*), *for-* (*forget*), *forþ-* (*forthcoming*), *tō-* (*today*), *þurh-* (*throughout*), and *wip-* (*withhold*). Among the numerous OE prefixes now lost are *of-*, used to indicate perfective action and *ymbe-*, meaning “around.”

As an example of the productivity and ease of affixing in OE, consider *milde*, an adjective meaning “mild, gentle.” From this stem, there was the verb *mildian* ‘to become mild’, the noun *mildnes* ‘mildness’, and another adjective *mildelic* ‘propitious’. *Mildelic* was also an adverb meaning “kindly.” Compounding produced still another adjective *mildheort* ‘merciful’; adding a suffix to this gave the noun *mildheortnes* ‘loving-kindness’. The prefix *un-* produced the adjectives *unmilde* ‘harsh’ and *unmildheort* ‘merciless’. All of these derived forms are recorded in OE; there may well have been others that were not recorded in surviving manuscripts.

Types of Word Formation Not Used in Old English Old English, then, had ample resources for forming new vocabulary items. But it is also worth considering some of the ways for creating words that OE did *not* use. Certainly one of the most productive means of word formation in PDE is **functional shift**, or using one part of speech as another without changing the form of the original by adding affixes. Nouns and verbs in particular participate freely in this process (*drive fast, a long drive*), but other parts of speech may also be involved. For example, PDE *up* may serve as a preposition (*up the wall*), an adverb (*climb up*), a noun (*ups and downs*), a verb (*to up the prices*), or an adjective (*on the up side*). OE could not employ functional shift because it was a synthetic language, and most parts of speech had to have distinctive inflections.

Another fertile way of creating vocabulary in PDE is the formation of nouns from two-part verbs by shifting the stress from the second element to the first (the verb *take off* and the noun *tákeoff*). This process was not available to OE for two reasons. First, the accent was strongly fixed on the first syllable or at least the root syllable, so a form like *take off* would have been impossible. Second, OE did not have verbs of this sort; instead of modifying meaning by a following separable particle like *off* or *up*, it prefixed these particles to verb stems. Thus, where PDE has *come up*, OE had *ūpcuman*; where PDE has *bring in*, OE had *ingebrigan*.

Acronyms and initialisms are a rich source for new words in PDE (e.g., *PETA, NASA, ATM, NFL, AWOL*). OE lacked acronyms, at least partly because the extensive use of acronyms presupposes a fairly high level of literacy—speakers must know the alphabet and what letters words begin with. Folk etymology was rare or absent in OE because most folk etymologies arise from

unfamiliar borrowed words, and OE had relatively few foreign loanwords. The word *sandblind* (partially blind) is an example of folk etymology. Here, the Old English *samblind* (half blind) has been altered to imply that one's vision has been obstructed by sand. Another example of folk etymology is “kitty corner” (diagonal), which comes from the Old French *catre* (“four”). Here, the Old French word *catre* has been interpreted to have something to do with cats (kitty).

Aside from shortened forms caused by sound changes, we have little evidence in OE for clipping (as with PDE *Net* from *Internet* or *flu* from *influenza*); there were quite likely clipped forms in the spoken language that never got recorded. Surely OE created a number of words through onomatopoeia because the process is universal. However, onomatopoeic words tend not to appear in writing, especially formal writing, so it is not surprising if they have not survived.

Lost Vocabulary

A large proportion of the rich Old English vocabulary is gone from PDE. Estimates vary; most assume that between 65 percent and 85 percent of the OE lexicon has been lost since OE times. Such figures are misleading, however. First, it is often not easy to decide whether a word has been “lost” or not: should we consider *fīon* ‘to hate’ lost, even though the OE noun *fīond* derived from this verb survives in the word *fiend*? Furthermore, raw counts are deceptive. Another way of looking at the overlap between OE and PDE vocabulary is to consider the survival rate of the most common, essential words of the language. Here the statistics present a different picture: of the 100 most frequent words in OE poetry, 80 have survived.⁵ Of the 100 most frequent words in written PDE, 96 were in OE, and the remaining four (*are*, *they*, *them*, *their*) are from Old Norse, a Germanic language closely related to English in OE times.⁶ Further, the overlap between the two lists is very high; in other words, the most common words of OE are also the most common words of PDE.

The fact remains, however, that a heavy proportion of the total OE lexicon has not survived. Given that there seems to be no upper limit to the size of a language's lexicon, why should any words be lost? There are many reasons.

- In a few cases, words seem to simply “wear out.” Sound changes reduce them to the point where there is phonetically so little left that they are replaced by longer, more distinctive forms. This is probably what happened to OE *ēa* ‘river, stream’ (which does survive, however, in the first syllable of *island*, though the word has been respelled by false analogy with Latin *insula*). OE *ā* ‘always’ may have suffered the same fate. Indeed, the first-person singular nominative pronoun came close to extinction when OE *ic* /ič/ lost its final consonant and was reduced to /i/.

5. Figures derived from John F. Madden and Francis P. Magoun, Jr., *A Grouped Frequency Word-List of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967).

6. Figures derived from Henry Kučera and W. Nelson Francis, *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English* (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1967).

- Words may be lost when sound changes make two previously distinct words identical. English usually tolerates the resulting homophones if they do not lead to confusion; hence *reed* (OE *hrēod*) and *read* (OE *rēdan*) both survive in PDE. However, if the two words are members of the same word class and are used in similar contexts, unacceptable ambiguity can arise. As was mentioned earlier, when sound changes made OE *lætan* ‘let, allow’ and OE *lettan* ‘hinder, delay’ identical in pronunciation (PDE /let/), one had to give way because both were transitive verbs used in similar contexts. The *let* meaning “hinder” does survive marginally in *let ball* (in tennis) and the legal phrase *without let or hindrance*, but it would be impossible in the context of “I won’t let you.” For a similar reason, English borrowed the ON third-person plural personal pronouns. Sound changes had made the words for “he” and “they” and the words for “her” and “their” identical in most dialects. Although English had lost and was losing many other grammatical distinctions expressed by inflections, the singular-plural distinction continued strong, so some of the original native forms had to be replaced.
- Thousands of words are lost because of cultural and technological changes; in a sense, it is not so much the words that are lost as it is their referents. Because our social and legal system is entirely different from that of the Anglo-Saxons, we have no need for the OE words *wergild* ‘compensation for a man’s life’, *māgcwalm* ‘murder of a relation’, or *ofweorpan* ‘to stone to death’. Technological changes have eliminated the referents for *æwul* ‘basket with a narrow neck for catching fish’, *sædlēap* ‘sower’s basket’, and *tænel* ‘wicker basket’.
- Taboos are responsible for the loss of some words. Words for death and dying, for example, are often replaced by euphemisms, which themselves become tainted by their meanings and are in turn replaced by other words or euphemisms. OE had an extremely common verb, *gewītan*, meaning “to go away.” By late OE, it had become a common euphemism for “to die.” The ultimate loss of *gewītan* from the language is probably the result of its unpleasant associations with death. The OE verb *hāman* ‘to have sexual intercourse with’ was common enough to appear numerous times in surviving manuscripts and to be used in many compound and derivative forms. Yet, it has completely disappeared, at least partly because of the taboos associated with its referent.
- Semantic changes in one area of vocabulary may set off a chain reaction that ends up with some words being squeezed out in a kind of linguistic musical chairs. OE *weorðan* ‘to become, happen; passive auxiliary’ was one of the most frequently used words in the language and seemingly would have had an excellent chance of survival. OE also had the verbs *cuman* ‘to come, go’, *gān* ‘to go, come’, and *becuman* ‘to come, approach, arrive, happen, come to be’. Over the years, the present clear distinction between *come* and *go* arose, and the usefulness of *becuman* in the meaning of “come” declined. In Middle English, a new verb *happen* was created from the Old Norse loan *hap*; *happen* now encroached on another meaning of both *weorðan* and *becuman*.

The French loanwords *approach* and *arrive* further invaded what had once been the territory of *becuman*. At the same time, from OE times on, *weorðan* had had a rival in *bēon* ‘to be’ as the passive auxiliary. By the twelfth century, *become* was being used in close to its present meaning of a change in state, a slight extension of its OE meaning “come to be.” Because the use of *weorðan* as a passive auxiliary was simultaneously giving way to *be*, *becuman* and *weorðan* were now in direct competition for the one remaining area of meaning, change of state. By the fourteenth century, it was clear that *become* was winning, and the last citation of *worþ* as a verb dates from the fifteenth century. Though we cannot explain why *worþ* should be lost and *become* retained, the process whereby one of them became redundant can be traced.⁷

This is not to imply that a language never can have two ways of expressing the same meaning or grammatical distinction. For example, PDE uses both *get* and *be* as passive auxiliaries. However, there is a definite stylistic difference between the two; *I got fired* is both stronger and more casual than *I was fired*. Moreover, the general tendency is to have only one form to express basic grammatical concepts. Certainly it is hard to imagine any way of expressing the progressive in PDE except by *be* + *-ing* or the agent of a passive construction except with *by*.

- If two dialects of a language use different words to refer to the same concrete object, confusion results when speakers of the two dialects try to communicate. For example, Americans from one part of the country are often puzzled to discover that what they call a *ground squirrel* is called a *gopher* in another part of the country. If the different dialects merge through continuous contact, one of the terms is likely to be abandoned. The existence of three words meaning “spider” in Old English—*ātorcōppe*, *lobbe*, *spiðra*—may have led to the loss of *ātorcōppe* and *lobbe* from standard English (though *attercop* survives dialectally).

The process can be accelerated if a loanword from another language adds to the number of synonyms. In OE, both *hyht* and *hōpa* meant “hope”; *hyht* had the additional meanings of “faith in” and “joy.” When *trust* was borrowed from Old Norse and *joy* from Old French, *hyht* lost its unique territory and became vulnerable to extinction. This vulnerability was only increased when, by Middle English, the word *hyȝt* (OE *hyht*) had become identical in pronunciation to another noun meaning “haste,” adding homonymy to dialect confusion.

- Fashion leads to the loss of many vocabulary items. This may involve the higher prestige of urban over rural forms, of upper-class words over what are perceived as lower-class words, or of foreign words over native words. After the Norman Conquest, the higher prestige of French as the language of the conquering and ruling class led to the loss of many Old English words.

7. Another contributing factor *may* have been avoidance of homophony. *Worþ* as verb was identical in sound to the adjective and noun *worþ*, whereas *become* was unique.

Examples include the replacement of OE *þēod* by French *people*, of *sīþ* by *journey*, of *wuldor* by *glory*, of *ǣðele* by *noble*, and of *feorh* by *spirit*.

OLD ENGLISH SEMANTICS

Semantic Categories

Semantics, or the nuanced meanings of words, is the most difficult aspect of language to treat systematically because it is the interface between language and the real world—and the real world is notoriously complex and unpredictable. Experience can be categorized not only in many ways, but also in several ways simultaneously. As an example, consider two semantic areas that have been widely studied: kinship terms and color terms. Obviously, there has been no change in possible biological relationships of human beings or in the rods and cones of the human eye between Old English times and today. Therefore, if we find differences in the OE and PDE semantic systems, they reflect not differences in the real world but differences in the way human beings interpret it.

Considering all the distinctions that could be made in kinship relationships, OE and PDE are really very similar. Neither has core terms expressing order of birth (Chinese, for example, has separate terms for a person's older and younger siblings). Both OE and PDE are “ego-oriented”; that is, the same individual may be *sister* to one person, *daughter* to another, *mother* to a third, and *aunt* to a fourth; the term used to describe the relationship varies according to the individual speaker or subject of conversation. OE and PDE also share terms for the members of the nuclear family: OE *mōdor*, *fæder*, *sunu*, *dohtor*, *sweostor*, *brōðor*. Both distinguish sex in most terms (PDE *cousin* is an exception), and both normally distinguish biological from legal relationships: OE *dohtor* versus *snoru* ‘daughter-in-law’.

However, OE tended to put less emphasis on generation differences beyond the nuclear family; *mago* was simply a male relative, *nefene* could be either a granddaughter or a niece, and a *nefa* could be a nephew, a second cousin, a stepson, or a grandson. OE also lacked separate terms for the marriage relationship; OE *wīf* meant simply “woman,” and OE *hūsbonda* meant “male head of the household.” Yet, the distinction between maternal and paternal relatives was more specifically made in OE. A maternal uncle was *ēam*, but a paternal uncle was *fædera*; a *geswīgira* was a sister's son.

In PDE, when we use the word *color*, we usually are thinking of only one aspect of color—hue, the dimension of color that ranges from red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and back to red. However, the human eye perceives other dimensions of color, including lightness (how “light” or “dark” the color is), saturation (the amount of gray in the color; its vividness), luster (the amount of light seemingly reflected from the surface), and scintillation (sparkling or twinkling). OE had most of the basic hue words of PDE, including, at least, words for red, yellow, green, violet, white, black, and gray. However, for reasons unknown, these terms for hue were used rather infrequently, at least in surviving texts. Texts rarely mention, for example, the hue of a

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and
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person's hair, complexion, or clothing. This omission is somewhat surprising because other Germanic cultures like Icelandic and neighboring Celtic cultures such as the Welsh and Irish pay particular attention to hue in their surviving texts.

However, color terms referring to saturation, lightness, luster, and scintillation appear frequently in OE texts. It is not always possible to be sure precisely what some color words meant, so the glosses are only approximate.

Saturation

<i>fealu</i> 'dusky'	<i>dunn</i> 'dingy'
<i>hasu</i> 'ashen'	<i>græg</i> 'gray'
<i>hār</i> 'hoary'	<i>wann</i> 'dark'

Lightness

<i>scīr</i> 'bright'
<i>beorht</i> 'bright'
<i>scīma</i> 'brightness'

Luster

<i>lēoma</i> 'gleam'
<i>glæd</i> 'shining'
<i>blīcan</i> 'glitter'
<i>brūn</i> 'having metallic luster'

Scintillation

<i>spircan</i> 'sparkle'
<i>scimerian</i> 'shimmer'
<i>blēobrygd</i> 'scintillation'
<i>brīgd</i> 'play of color'

It might be tempting to suggest that speakers of OE tended to ignore hue because, first, their culture lacked the wide array of chemical dyes that makes us so conscious of hue today. Second, OE speakers had little artificial lighting in a country notorious for cloudy days and long dark winters. The cones of the eye, required for perceiving hue, do not function well in dim light. We might conclude that OE speakers simply did not see hue as often or in as much variety as we do today. However, this theory does not explain why Celtic speakers and other Germanic speakers in equally gloomy lands reveled in terms descriptive of hue.

In sum, it is dangerous to insist on one-to-one correspondences between a language and the culture that speaks this language. For example, if the proverbial man from Mars examined only the etymology of many common PDE expressions, he might conclude that English speakers are highly religious. Our first meal of the day is "breaking a fast." When we part, we ask the blessing of God upon each other ("goodbye" is historically from "God be with you"). Given the slightest emotional disturbance, we invoke a deity (*Good Lord! Good heavens! My God! God only knows!*) or call down a curse (*What the devil! To hell with it! Damn it all!*). The fact is that there is no tidy and reliable relationship between a culture and the semantic systems of its language.

Semantic Change

It is difficult enough to deal with the semantics of PDE, where we at least have our intuitions as native speakers as a guide; it is much more difficult to recapture the semantics of a much earlier stage of a language for which surviving

texts are few or nonexistent. Only occasionally are we able to glimpse the process of semantic change from Indo-European to Germanic. One instance is the IE root **teuə*; ‘to swell’ (cf. the Latin loans into English *tumor*, *tuber*, *tumulus*). This appears in OE as *þēoh* ‘thigh’ and, from a variant form of the same root, *þūma* ‘thumb’, examples of both concretization and narrowing of meaning.

The basic meanings of the OE core vocabulary do seem to have remained relatively stable over the centuries, though the individual items often have developed extended meanings. For example, the OE meaning for such words as *mother*, *son*, *tree*, *sun*, *good*, *have*, and *be* seem to be much the same in OE and in PDE. Thus, OE *habban* had the same basic sense of possession as its PDE reflex *have*, even if PDE has added idiomatic meanings as exemplified in *I’ve been had*, *I won’t have you talking like that*, *I had some friends in for the weekend*, *I had my car stolen*, and even if PDE has lost some of the earlier “fringe” meanings of *have*, as in *Do you, sir, have me for a fool?*

In some instances, we can offer post hoc explanations for semantic shifts. For example, two OE words for “horse” were *hors*, the basic term or equines, and *stēda*, which meant “stud-horse, stallion.” OE *hors* has survived with its OE meaning virtually unchanged, but *steed* has lost its earlier close association with breeding potential and has become a “poetic” word for a spirited horse, especially a war-horse. In this case, it is reasonable to assume that when the French loan *stallion* was introduced, it competed directly with *stēda* for the meaning of “uncastrated male horse, stud-horse.” *Stēda* survived by shifting its basic meaning to another semantic plane where it was distinguished from *stallion* by its romantic connotations.

In other cases, however, there is no detectable motivation for semantic shifts. Four OE words all referring generally to lack of light were *dim*, *sweart*, *deorc*, and *blæc*. All of them survive in more or less recognizable form in PDE as *dim*, *swarthy*, *dark*, and *black*. In OE, *dim*, *sweart*, and *deorc* also were used metaphorically to refer to evil, but *blæc* apparently was not. In PDE, *dim* and *swarthy* have lost their extended meaning of evil, *dark* has retained it, and *black* has added it. Today we can speak of a *black heart* or *dark thoughts*, but not of a *dim heart* or *swarthy thoughts*.

Generalization and Narrowing Generalization, or extension of meaning, can be represented by OE *gesūnd* ‘safe, healthy, uninjured’; PDE has added the more abstract meanings of “thorough” (*a sound scolding*), “unbroken” (*a sound sleep*), “reliable” (*a sound investment*), and “sensible” (*sound advice*). OE *flicorian* seems to have meant only “to move the wings, to flutter,” while PDE *flicker* has been extended to include the movement of light (*a flickering candle*) or even of emotion (*flickering interest*).

It is much easier to find examples of narrowed meaning of words between OE and PDE, perhaps because, as English has incorporated thousands of new loanwords the semantic domain covered by a single item has been correspondingly limited. For example, OE *wēd* could refer to any garment, whereas PDE *weeds* is used only to refer to mourning clothes (widow’s weeds). OE *wēod* referred to herbs or grass in general; PDE *weed* refers only to undesirable,

unwanted plants. OE *swāetan* meant to exude liquid, including blood; PDE *sweat* is usually restricted to the exuding of water, especially perspiration.

Amelioration and Pejoration Amelioration, or a change to a more favorable meaning, can be exemplified by OE *prættig* ‘tricky, sly, wily’; compare PDE *pretty*. The shift in meaning from OE *smītan* ‘to soil, pollute, defile’ to PDE *smite* could also be considered amelioration. Pejoration, much more common than amelioration, can be illustrated by OE *sælig* ‘happy, prosperous’, which has become PDE *silly*. Other examples are OE *cræftig* ‘skillful, strong, learned’, PDE *crafty*; OE *lāwede* ‘laic, layman’, PDE *lewd*; and OE *ceorl* ‘peasant, freeman’, PDE *churl*.

Strengthening and Weakening As we have noted earlier, strengthening or intensification is a rare type of semantic change. One example is OE *wrecan*, PDE *wreak*, as in *wreak havoc*, *wreak vengeance*. The OE word could be used in the strong sense of “avenge, punish” but also often had the milder meaning of “push, impel” or simply “pronounce, relate.” Instances of weakening are easier to find. A few examples are OE *hraðor* ‘hastily, immediately’, PDE *rather*; OE *sweltan* ‘to die’, PDE *swelter*; OE *drēorig* ‘bloody, gory’, PDE *dreary*.

Abstraction and Concretization Abstraction, the change from a concrete to a more abstract meaning, can be exemplified by OE *grund*, which meant simply ‘ground; the bottom of something, such as a body of water’. During ME, the more abstract meanings of “fundamental principle, foundation, basis” developed, as in PDE *grounds for divorce*. The opposite kind of change, from abstract to more concrete, is illustrated by OE *hlafordscipe* ‘authority, rule’, literally “lordship.” In late ME, the word took on an additional, more concrete meaning when it became used as a title for specific persons, as in *Your Lordship*.

Shift in Denotation Occasionally, words undergo such an extreme shift in denotation that it is not easy to trace the path of the change. OE *dwellan* meant “to lead into error, deceive, wander, err,” a very different meaning from its PDE descendant *dwell*. The PDE meaning was probably influenced by a similar-sounding Old Norse verb *dvelja* ‘delay, stay, remain’. Less explicable is the change in OE *clūd* ‘rock, hill’, PDE *cloud*.

Shift in Connotation As noted in Chapter 1, shifts in connotation are often closely related to amelioration and pejoration but may also involve changes that are neither especially ameliorative or pejorative. Hence connotative shifts can be treated as a category in and of themselves. The examples given in Chapter 1 from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* involved the OE verb *scūfan* ‘push, thrust’ and its PDE reflex *shove*, and the OE noun *wyrm* ‘serpent, dragon, worm’ and its PDE reflex *worm*. Today we simply would not use either the word *shove* or *worm* in the lofty context of a serious, elegaic poem because both words have undergone such drastic connotative changes over the centuries.

All of these semantic shifts are relatively simple. Many semantic changes, however, are much more complex. Consider the history of the word *fair*.

- Old English: *fæger* “beautiful, attractive”
- End of twelfth century: “beautiful” but also “free of fraud or injustice, legal” (fair trial, fair play)
- Thirteenth century and much of ME: “unblemished”
- Sixteenth century: “beautiful” but also “blond” as in “fair-haired boy”
- Eighteenth century: “so-so, adequate”
- Present day: “so-so” and “free of injustice”; also “blond” referring to complexion; also “uncloudy” referring to weather.

Because so many semantic changes, subtle and unsubtle, have occurred since OE times, translating OE words with PDE cognates is full of pitfalls. The danger can be exemplified by Ezra Pound’s translation of the OE poem “The Seafarer.” The translation is a *tour de force* in its preservation of the OE alliterating sounds and its high proportion of native words, but sometimes it is almost disastrous semantically. In the first line, *May I for my own self song’s truth reckon*, the word *reckon* strikes a jarring note because although the OE word *gerecenian* did mean “to relate, to recount,” its PDE descendant has undergone a narrowing of meaning to “to compute, calculate,” or a degeneration to a colloquialism meaning “to think, assume.” An even greater semantic infelicity appears in the line *Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship’s head*. OE *nearu* meant “narrow” in the physical sense, but also meant “oppressive, dangerous”; PDE has lost the latter meaning. In the same line, Pound apparently did not know that *head* is PDE sailor’s jargon for “toilet.” Many other such semantic misfits appear in the translation, but these examples suffice to illustrate the problem of relying too heavily on etymology and earlier meanings. Like all other aspects of language, semantic change is inevitable.

OLD ENGLISH DIALECTS

Most of our discussion of Old English has assumed a homogeneous dialect over both time and place. This was certainly not the case. Great changes occurred in the language between A.D. 450 and A.D. 1100—so great that the Saxon invaders of the fifth century surely would not have been able to understand the speech of the warriors fighting beside Harold Godwinson at Stamford Bridge. The most important change over these 650 years was the reduction of all unstressed vowels to /ə/ and the consequent loss of distinctions between inflectional endings; this change is shown more clearly in Chapter 6.

At any given point in time, the language spoken in England varied from place to place. Some of this variation probably arrived with the first settlers, and further differences arose after settlement, although what evidence there is suggests that mutual intelligibility among contemporary dialects was the rule throughout the entire OE period.

From the few remaining texts written outside the West Saxon area and from developments that appear in Middle English, it seems that there were two broad

dialectal areas in Anglo-Saxon England: Anglian in the North and Southern in the South. Traditionally, four dialectal areas are recognized—Northumbrian and Mercian in the northern part of the island, and West Saxon and Kentish in the southern part. It should be kept in mind, however, that dialect boundaries are rarely sharp. In the absence of major geographical obstacles such as mountain ranges or unnavigable and unfordable rivers that prevent communication between settlements, the boundaries between dialects are not discrete but rather form a continuum.

For the most part, the differences among OE dialects—as is the case among PDE dialects—lay primarily in phonology, vowels in particular. Unfortunately, we cannot know exactly how any OE vowel was pronounced. We can, however, know a bit about how the vowels were pronounced, thanks to comparative Germanic philology. We can make inferences based on changes to other Germanic languages. The prestige of the West Saxon dialect in writing may have influenced the spelling (but not the pronunciation) of vowels in other dialectal areas. Naturally, there were also vocabulary differences, differences that became more striking after the permanent Norse settlements in England. Syntactic differences were of little significance. The morphology was similar in all areas, although the North lost inflectional distinctions earlier than the South did.

A detailed description of OE dialectal differences is beyond our scope here. To the superficial glance, the most striking characteristics include the heavier use of diphthongs (as opposed to pure vowels) and the extensive palatalization of velar consonants in the West Saxon areas (/g/ becomes /j/), and the corresponding lack of both in the Northern dialects. In Kent, both earlier /ȝ/ and /ǣ/ became /ē/; the heavy preponderance of ⟨e⟩ over other vowel symbols is almost enough to identify a manuscript as Kentish in origin.

The problem of defining Old English dialects is exacerbated, of course, by the paucity of surviving texts. Even given texts and that ideal situation of the same text copied at about the same time into two dialects, one must still take into account the possible eccentricities of the individual scribes. Moreover, because writing is at best an incomplete and imperfect representation of speech, there is always the possibility that what appear to be phonological differences are simply different spelling conventions. For example, early Northumbrian texts often use ⟨u⟩ and ⟨d⟩ where Southern texts use a form of the letter ⟨w⟩, and ⟨ð⟩ or ⟨þ⟩, respectively. This difference does not mean that the North did not have the phonemes /w/ and /θ/; it means simply that the scribes did not have separate graphemes for representing them and so made do with approximations. A further problem is that, because most of our manuscripts are copies, we cannot be sure to what extent the original text has been contaminated by the scribe's own dialectal peculiarities and spelling conventions.

To illustrate some of these problems, we reproduce below five lines from a Northumbrian and a West Saxon version of *Cædmon's Hymn*, one of the few OE works that survive in multiple copies. (In the first line, the words *aelda* and *eorðan* are not dialectal variants; they are entirely different words, meaning “of men” and “of earth,” respectively.) We do not indicate vowel length here because the manuscripts themselves do not do so.

<i>North:</i>	He aerist scop	aelda barnum
<i>West Saxon:</i>	He ærest sceop	eorðan bearnum
	<i>He first shaped</i>	<i>of men [earth] for the sons</i>
<i>North:</i>	heben til hrofe,	haleg scepen;
<i>West Saxon:</i>	heofon to hrofe,	halig scyppend;
	<i>heaven as a roof,</i>	<i>holy creator;</i>
<i>North:</i>	tha middungeard	moncynnæs uard,
<i>West Saxon:</i>	þa middageard	moncynnes weard,
	<i>then earth</i>	<i>mankind's guardian,</i>
<i>North:</i>	eci dryctin,	æfter tiadæ
<i>West Saxon:</i>	ece drihten,	æfter teode
	<i>eternal lord,</i>	<i>afterwards brought forth</i>
<i>North:</i>	firim foldu,	frea allmechtig.
<i>West Saxon:</i>	firim foldan,	frea ælmihtig.
	<i>for men region,</i>	<i>lord almighty.</i>

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

Here we use the term “literature” to include all writings in prose or verse from the Old English period. Few OE texts have survived. Of those that have, most exist in only one manuscript, rarely the author’s original copy.

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The surprise, however, is that we have as many texts as we do, considering the enemies of preservation—fire, damp, vermin, negligence, the Viking invasions, the Norman Conquest, the dissolution of the monasteries, the zeal of reformers, and political and religious upheavals in general. Furthermore, the chances that a text would be written were small in the first place. During the entire OE period, literacy was confined primarily to the clergy. There was only a small potential audience for books, and their contents were restricted to what the clergy felt was appropriate to preserve. Decisions to copy any text were not made lightly because books were incredibly expensive. Paper had not yet reached Europe, so vellum was the chief writing material, and the production of even one modest volume required the skins of scores of sheep or lambs. The printing press, photocopiers, word processors, and compact discs were still several hundred years in the future, so every copy of every book had to be laboriously written by hand.

Finally, given the decision to write a new book or copy an existing manuscript, the odds against its being written in English were high. Most literate Anglo-Saxons were bilingual in Latin and English (and occasionally in Irish). For the most part, Latin was considered the only appropriate language for serious literature, and Latin was the only language for communication beyond the confines of England.

The miracle is that we have as much OE literature as we do. The use of vellum as a medium was one advantage; vellum is much more durable than paper, particularly most of today's paper (including recycled paper), which is made from wood pulp rather than cloth and which is treated with chemicals that hasten its deterioration. (Alkaline paper, however, can last indefinitely). The Viking invasions, destructive as they were of many manuscripts, also indirectly contributed to the number of surviving texts in Old English: the accompanying severe decline in Latin scholarship in England meant that more texts had to be written in English. Also, under normal circumstances, books in any language would have been treated with more care in Anglo-Saxon times than we generally treat our books today. After all, even one book was a major investment; and without electronic media, books were the only means of passing on the wisdom of the past, aside from the notoriously fallible human memory.

With a few notable exceptions, Old English texts are anonymous. Authors received no royalties, so there was no economic motive for asserting one's authorship. The cult of individuality had yet to be invented, and the idea of "creativity" and originality would never have occurred to an Old English author. Indeed, it would have been more important to assure readers that the material was all based on the old authorities and that the author was merely serving as preserver and transmitter. One would never be charged with plagiarism, but one might be faulted for invention.

The overwhelming preponderance of OE literature is religious. To some extent, however, the division into religious and secular is an artificial one; religion so permeated all of life during the Middle Ages that almost no text is free of religious references. A more reasonable distinction might be that between religious subject matter and secular subject matter.

Prose

In the history of the literature of a culture, the evolution of a respectable prose style usually lags behind that of verse. English was the first of the medieval European vernaculars to develop a flexible, lively, yet often sophisticated prose. One reason for this early development is probably the fact that the other possible contenders—chiefly French and Italian—were inhibited by their obvious and close relationship to Latin. In the year 950, Latin would have been a far easier language for a French speaker to master than for an English speaker, and the French writer would turn quite naturally to Latin as a prose vehicle. Even though most literate Englishmen, especially prior to the Viking invasions, would have been literate in Latin as well as English, the great differences between Latin and English would have made many of them less at home in Latin than their Continental counterparts were. After the great decline in English scholarship following the Viking invasions, writing in English and translation of Latin works into English was encouraged, not because English was felt to be superior—it was not—but because it was faster to train clerics to read and write their native tongue than to teach them a foreign language. Whatever the reasons, English writers were using vernacular prose confidently well in advance of other Europeans.

A surprising variety of OE prose writing survives, though a heavy proportion consists of translations from Latin. King Alfred translated or had translated into English Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Orosius's compendious history (to which Alfred had some original additions made). Among the Biblical translations of the OE period are the *Heptateuch* (the first seven books of the Old Testament), portions of the Psalms, and the late *Anglo-Saxon Gospels*. There are even fragments of prose fiction and fantasy, including *Apollonius of Tyre*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, and *Wonders of the East*.

King Alfred was also responsible for beginning the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (actually a series of chronicles kept at various centers in England), an invaluable source of information not only about Anglo-Saxon history but also about the Old English language. Begun in the late ninth century, some of the texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were kept, more or less continuously, for almost three hundred years. The latest version goes down to 1154, almost a century after the Norman Conquest. Most of the writing in the *Chronicle* is natural, matter-of-fact but undistinguished. Some of the later entries, though, show true craftsmanship and can be read with pleasure and even excitement today.

A large amount of religious writing in prose survives from the OE period. Most notable are the works of Abbot Ælfric (c.955–c.1010), the outstanding prose writer of his time. Ælfric authored the largest vernacular homily cycle (a collection of sermons to be given on Sundays and feast days) of the time. Most of Ælfric's sources were Latin, but in his sermons, homilies, and saints' lives, Ælfric freely adapted his sources to fit English needs. He wrote a sophisticated, vigorous, often elegant prose that, while showing influence of Latin literary devices, also employs native rhythms and alliteration. The result is so "poetic" that earlier scholars printed passages of his works as verse rather than prose.

Bishop Wulfstan (1008–95) is best known for his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* ("Wulfstan's Sermon to the English"), an eloquent and fiery admonition to the English people for their sins, to which he attributed the evils of the Viking invasions and various natural disasters. Other, usually anonymous, homilies survive in the two collections known as the *Blickling Homilies* and the *Vercelli Homilies*.

Among the miscellaneous prose writings of the OE period are genealogies, glossaries to Latin works (important for their information about OE vocabulary and semantics), laws, charters, and a few letters. Scientific writing is represented by leech books and herbariums and by Byrhtferth's *Manual*, which treats astronomy and mathematics.

Verse

For the modern student, Old English literature usually means Old English poetry, although only about 30,000 lines of poetry survive—roughly the same number that we have from Chaucer alone in Middle English. There are four extant books of Old English poetry. The Junius manuscript is an illustrated poetic anthology. The anthology known as *The Exeter Book* is so called for its location in the Exeter Cathedral, where it was donated in the eleventh century.

It is the largest surviving collection of Old English poetry. The *Vercelli Book* is a mix of poetry and prose. How it came to be located in Italy is a matter of debate. The Nowell Codex, a mixture of poetry and prose, is the manuscript that contains *Beowulf*. See Figure 5.7.

Here are the first lines of that poem in Old English and in Present Day English.

Old English: HWÆT, WE GAR-Dena in geardagum, þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon! Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum...

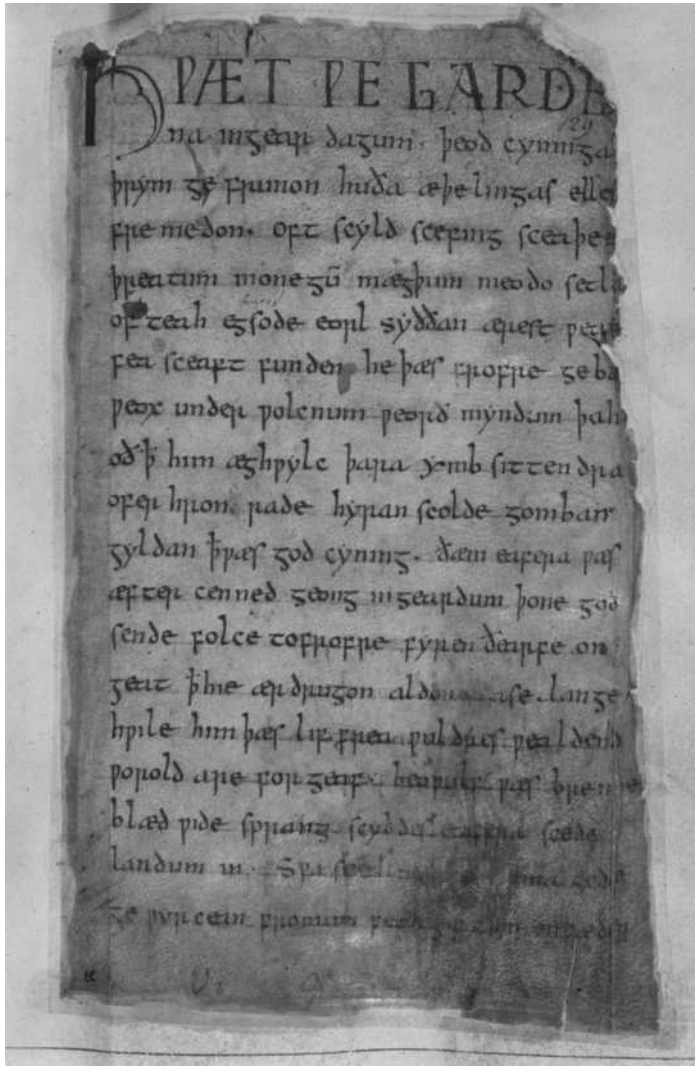


FIGURE 5.7 The first page of the surviving manuscript of the epic poem *Beowulf*. The entire manuscript, which is estimated to be 1,000 years old, is housed in the British Museum.

The British Library/PhotoLibrary

Present-Day English: So, the Spear-Danes in days gone by and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns. There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes.... (translation by Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Norton, 2001.)

OE poetry falls into two broad general classifications, epic verse and shorter poems. *Beowulf*, which at 3,182 lines comprises about one-tenth of surviving OE verse, is the only complete secular epic; others, such as *Exodus* and *Judith*, are on Biblical topics. Most of the shorter poems are usually somewhat vaguely classified as lyrical or elegiac (OE poetry could rarely be called lighthearted); they include such well-known poems as "The Seafarer," "The Wanderer," "The Dream of the Rood," and "Deor." In addition, there are a number of poems that can be generally categorized as didactic verse.

The basis of OE verse was the four-stress, unrhymed, alliterative line, a Germanic form that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them from the Continent.⁸ Each OE poetic line was divided into two half-lines, and the first stressed word of the second half-line determined the alliteration for the entire line. Rhythmically, OE verse was a time-stressed line, with approximately equal time between major stresses. Unlike the syllable-counting verse more familiar in English today, the number of unstressed syllables in a line could vary; in reading OE verse aloud, one simply speeds up for a series of unstressed syllables and slows down for one (or no) unstressed syllable between major stresses. There were also various conventions with respect to which initial sounds alliterated with each other and to the relative positions of stressed and unstressed syllables in the line.

Although the flow of OE verse was frequently interrupted by variations (or apposition), the syntax did not differ in important respects from that of OE prose. There does seem to have been a poetic vocabulary of words used chiefly or exclusively in verse. Of course, an extensive lexicon was essential in order for poets to have at their disposal synonyms beginning with various sounds to fit the alliterative demands of any given line. Reproduced below are lines 6–14 of "The Wanderer," an elegiac lyric from the *Exeter Book*. The accented syllables are in bold type.

Swā cwæð eardstapa ,	earfeþa gemyndig,
Thus spoke earth-stepper,	of hardships mindful,
wrāþra wælslehta,	winemæga hryre:
of horrible slaughters,	of dear kinsmen destruction:
" Oft ic sceolde āna	ūhtna gehwylce
"Often I have had to alone	dawn each
mīne ceare cwīþan .	Nis nū cwīcra nān
my care bemoan.	Not is now alive none

8. Alliteration, or front rhyme, is ideally suited to Germanic languages with their stress on the root syllable of words. For the same reason, throughout its history, English has been a difficult language to rhyme. End-rhyme demands that all sounds after the stressed vowel be the same; the closer the stress is to the beginning of the word, the more complicated the rhyme must be and the less likely that a rhyme will exist in the language. (PDE has a number of common words, such as *orange* and *month*, for which there is no rhyme at all.)

þe ic him mōdsefan	mīnne durre
<i>to whom I to him soul</i>	<i>my dare</i>
sweotule āsecgan.	Ic tō sōþe wāt
<i>clearly express.</i>	<i>I as truth know</i>
þæt biþ in eorle	indryhten þēaw,
<i>that is in brave man</i>	<i>noble custom</i>
þæt hē his ferðlocan	fæste binde,
<i>that he his breast</i>	<i>fast bind,</i>
healde his hordcofan,	hycge swā hē wille."
<i>hold his thoughts,</i>	<i>think as he will."</i>

Translation

Thus spoke the wanderer, remembering hardships, horrible slaughter, and the fall of dear kinsmen: "Often, at each dawn, I, alone, have had to be-moan my cares. No one is now alive to whom I dare reveal my soul. I know in truth that it is a noble custom in a brave man to bind fast his heart and hold back his thoughts—whatever he may be thinking."

Because a time-stressed rhythm characterized not only OE verse but also ordinary speech, the dividing line between verse and prose in Old English was less sharp than that between the syllable-counting verse and the prose of today. Some OE writers employed "metrical prose," prose that fell roughly into four-stress phrases. These phrases were further unified by alliteration, sometimes heavy alliteration, although the detailed alliterative rules of OE verse were not strictly observed.

With the Norman Conquest, the long and glorious tradition of alliterative verse in English came to a halt. This is movingly documented by a short fragment written about 1100 and preserved in a manuscript in Worcester Cathedral Library. The piece celebrates Anglo-Saxon learning and laments its decline under foreign (French) teachers. It is doubly sad because it exemplifies what it deplores: the little poem is itself very bad alliterative verse.

þeos lærden ure leodan on englisc.
these taught our people in English
 næs deorc heore liht. ac hit fæire glod.
not was dark their light but it bright shone
 nu is þeo leore forleten. & þet folc is forloren.
now is the teaching neglected & the people are lost
 nu beoþ oþre leoden. þeo læreþ ure folc.
now are other languages which learn our people
 & feole of þen lorþeines losiaþ. & þet folc forþ mid.
& many of the teachers are being destroyed & the people forth with

Translation

These taught our people in English. Their light was not dark, but shone brightly. Now their teaching is abandoned and the people are lost. Now our

people learn other languages, and many of the teachers are perishing and the people with them.

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ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

- When the Romans were unable to defend their far-flung outpost in England, the island was invaded by the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians in about 449. England was re-Christianized in 597 when Pope Gregory sent missionaries. It endured several centuries of Norse invasions, with the Vikings making a permanent settlement in the Danelaw in 878.
- Phonologically, the consonant system was similar to that of PDE, but included phonemically long consonants and lacked phonemic /ŋ/ and phonemically voiced fricatives. Length was also phonemic for vowels.
- Morphologically, OE was still a heavily inflected language, including four cases, three genders, and two numbers for nouns and adjectives.
- Syntactically, OE word order resembled that of PDE but was freer and more varied.
- Lexically, OE had a rich vocabulary and extensive resources for forming new words; loanwords comprised an insignificant part of the lexicon.
- Old English literature is often religious. Old English poetry is characterized by the four-stress alliterated line. Prose collections include Biblical translations, chronicles, homilies, and stories of saints' lives.

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